

A woman in a white dress is falling through a dense layer of autumn leaves. She is positioned diagonally across the frame, with her head towards the top left and her legs towards the bottom right. The leaves are in various shades of orange, red, and yellow. The background is a dark, textured surface.

PLANET stories

Did the feminist, anti-establishment artist
of the 1960s and 1970s ever leave the land
behind her? Not so much, says the author.

The REBEL of VALKYR

By **JOAN MARCUS**
Illustrated by **JOAN MARCUS**

Chicago: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 1998. Pp. 112. \$19.95. ISBN 0-226-56411-1. Hbk. \$14.95. ISBN 0-226-56412-9. Pbk.

PLANET STORIES



VOL. 4, NO. 8

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

FALL, 1950

- *Flaming Novel of the Starways*
THE REBEL OF VALKYR **Alfred Coppel** 4
 . . . From the Dark Ages of Space emerged the Second Empire . . . ruled by a child, a usurper and a fool! The Great Throne of Imperial Earth commanded a thousand vassal worlds—bleak, starved worlds that sullenly whispered of galactic revolt . . . At last, like eagles at a distant eyrie, the Star-kings gathered . . . not to whisper, but to strike!
- *Two Powerful Novels*
THE SKY IS FALLING **C. H. Liddell** 42
 The Blow-Up was coming. It was near, near . . . Johnny Dyson knew he would see it soon. One minute, Earth. The next . . . little Nova, weeping radioactive dust into the Void. Then Johnny and the Robot would build an Eden on Mars . . .
- STAR SHIP** **Poul Anderson** 66
 The strangest space-castaways of all! The Terran Explorers left their great interstellar ship unmanned in a tight orbit around Khazak—descended, all of them, in a lifeboat to investigate that alien, weirdly medieval world—and the lifeboat cracked up!
- *Five Thrilling Short Stories*
DEATH-WISH **Ray Bradbury** 29
 They wandered the dead and fragile cities, looking for the legendary Blue Bottle—not knowing what it was, nor caring, not really wanting to find it . . . ever . . .
- THE CROWDED COLONY** **Jay B. Drexel** 36
 The Conquerors laughed loudly at the dusty shrines, those crude and homely temples in the desert. More softly laughed the Martians, who dreamed of laughing last . . .
- MEEM** **Margaret St. Clair** 58
 The fog-shrouded marshlands of Vaudria seethed with manhunt . . . and Duncan, with his stolen secret, sought refuge in the Earth-Ship GORGO. Safe behind steel . . . until . . .
- STRANGE EXODUS** **Robert Abernathy** 85
 Gigantic, mindless, the Monsters had come out of space to devour Earth. Where, on this gutted, cosmic carcass, could humanity flee?
- PATCH** **William Shedenhelm** 93
 Old pilots like Pop Gillette weren't needed any longer to handle the big ships . . . until everything went haywire on the Venus run!
- *Planet's Regular Feature*
THE VIZIGRAPH **by The Readers** 98

T. T. SCOTT, *President*

JEROME BIXBY, *Editor*

MALCOLM REISS, *General Manager*

PLANET STORIES: Published quarterly by Love Romances Pub. Co., Inc., 130 W. 42 St., New York 18, N. Y. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1950, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Entered as second-class matter, October 2, 1941, at the Post Office at New York 1, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. Price 20¢ per copy. Yearly subscription rate 50¢ in advance. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 130 W. 42 St., New York 18, N. Y. Printed in U. S. A.

What is YOUR NAME Doing FOR YOU?

Do you know the vibrations of your name affect, your personal conditions, your success, your happiness even your health?

Do You Know How to Adjust Your Name?

To bring about the things you desire, these and many hundreds of questions are answered in the NEW SENSATIONAL "HEQUAZ ODD NAME BOOK."

The Most Unusual Book of Its Kind

Do you know that both divorces and happy marriages are the outer results of the vibrations of names? If you are not the success you think you should be. You may find the fault lies within your name.

Parents when you name your children do you know what vibrations you are putting into action in their lives?

**JUST THE BOOK FOR PARENTS WHO WISH TO NAME THEIR CHILDREN
THIS MARVELOUS BOOK SHOULD BE IN HANDS OF WRITERS! ACTORS! PARENTS!
IN NEED OF NAMES THAT ARE UNUSUAL, BEAUTIFUL AND ATTRACTIVE
BUY TODAY! THE BOOK OF A THOUSAND ODD AND BEAUTIFUL NAMES**

When you read this sensational book it will open a new field of interest to you.

Odd Name Collecting

Be among the thousands that are taking up this new and interesting hobby. It is loads of fun wherever you are, when you hear an odd name to jot it down for your collection.

Membership in the Hequaz Odd Name Collecting Club

This will entitle you to a beautiful membership certificate to hang upon your wall. Something you will be proud to show your friends.

A free list of 50 names to begin your collection and every three months the addresses of members all over the country will be sent you. So you can either exchange or sell your names to other members. This membership also makes you eligible to enter the ODD NAME COLLECTING CONTEST that starts March 1, 1950 and ends September 1, 1950.



ALL CASH PRIZES

1st PRIZE.....	\$250.00
2nd PRIZE.....	\$150.00
3rd PRIZE.....	\$100.00
4th PRIZE.....	\$ 50.00
5th PRIZE.....	\$ 25.00

Really Something New! Something Different to Do

Right now get started win one of these cash prizes.

Easy! Simple! Loads of Fun for Every One!

Besides a hobby that will grow more interesting and profitable as the years go by.

Mail Coupon Now

HEQUAZ CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL OF NUMEROLOGY

268 North State Street, Marion, Ohio

I enclose \$3.50 for "HEQUAZ ODD NAME BOOK."

If you desire MEMBERSHIP CERTIFICATE IN THE "HEQUAZ ODD NAME COLLECTING CLUB" which entitles you to enter the contest. Enclose one dollar extra.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....ZONE.....STATE.....

All winners will be notified by return mail

Sponsored by "HEQUAZ CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL OF NUMEROLOGY"

A Bargain in Rich Adventure



NORTHWEST ROMANCES

A Magazine Of

**STIRRING ADVENTURE
IN THE NORTHLANDS**

NORTHWEST features vivid, colorful tales laid in the wild, peril-laden expanse of the treacherous snow-ice country . . . the rugged Arctic where proud male and reckless female pit muscle and wile against nature's frigid fury. You'll find a brace of action-packed, thrill-laden novels, novelets, short sto-

ries and true-to-life articles of the sourdough country by such outstanding authors of adventure as Dan Cushman, C. Hall Thompson, John Jo Carpenter and B. McConnell.

DON'T MISS IT . . . SEE YOUR NEWSDEALER NOW

NORTHWEST ROMANCES

ONLY TWENTY CENTS!

the Rebel of Valkyr

By ALFRED COPPEL

OUT OF THE DARK AGES OF the Interregnum emerged the Second Empire. Once again in the space of a millennium, the banner of Imperial Earth waved above the decimated lands of the inhabited worlds. Four generations of conquerors, heirs to the greatness of the Thousand Emperors, had recreated the Galactic Empire, by force of arms. But technology, the Great Destroyer, was feared and forbidden. Only witches, warlocks and sorcerers remembered the old knowledge, and the mobs, tortured by the racial memories of the awful destruction of the Civil Wars, stoned these seekers and burned them in the squares of towns built amid the rubble of the old wars. The ancient, mighty space-ships—indestructible, eternal—carried men and horses, fire and sword across the Galaxy at the bidding of the warlords. The Second Empire—four generations out of isolated savagery—feudal, grim; a culture held together by bonds forged of blood and iron and the loyalty of the warrior star-kings . . .

—Quintus Bland,
ESSAYS ON GALACTIC HISTORY.

I

KIERON, WARLORD OF VAL-
kyr, paced the polished floor angrily. The flickering lights of the vast

mirrored chamber glinted from the jewels in his ceremonial harness and shimmered down the length of his silver cape. For a moment, the star-king paused before the tall double doors of beaten bronze, his strong hands toying with the hilt of his sword. The towering Janizaries of the Palace Guard stood immobile on either side of the arching doorway, their great axes resting on the flagstones. It was as though the dark thoughts that coursed through Kieron's mind were—to them—unthinkable. The huge warriors from the heavy planets of the Pleiades were stolid, loyal, unimaginative. And even a star-king did not dream of assaulting the closed portals of the Emperor's chambers.

Kieron's fingers opened and closed spasmodically over the gem-crusted pommel of his weapon; his dark eyes glittered with unspent fury. Muttering an oath, he turned away from the silent door and resumed his pacing. His companion, a brawny man in the plain battle harness of Valkyr, watched him quietly from under bushy yellow brows. He stood with his great arms folded over the plaits of grizzled yellow hair that hung to his waist, his deeply-lined face framed by the loosened lacings of a winged helmet. A huge sword hugged his naked thigh; a massive blade with worn and sweat-stained hilt.

The lord of Valkyr paused in his angry

. . . From the Dark Ages of Space emerged the Second Empire . . . ruled by a child, a usurper and a fool! The Great Throne of Imperial Earth commanded a thousand vassal worlds—bleak, starved worlds that sullenly whispered of galactic revolt . . . At last, like eagles at a distant eyrie, the Star-kings gathered . . . not to whisper, but to strike!



X-225N

Myan

Like great silver fish leaping up into the bowl of night, the ships of the Valkyr fleet rose from Kalgan . . .

acing to glare at his aide. "By the Great Destroyer, Nevitta! How long are we to stand this?"

"Patience, Kieron, patience." The old warrior spoke with the assurance of lifelong familiarity. "They try us sorely, but we have waited three weeks. A little longer can do no harm."

"Three weeks!" Kieron scowled at Nevitta. "Will they *drive* us into rebellion? Is that their intention? I swear I would not have taken this from Gilmer himself!"

"The great Emperor would never have dealt with us so. The fighting men of Valkyr were ever closest to his heart, Kieron. This is a way of doing that smacks of a woman's hand." He spat on the polished floor. "May the Seven Hells claim her!"

Kieron grunted shortly and turned again toward the silent door. Ivane! Ivane the Fair . . . Ivane the schemer. What devil's brew was she mixing now? Intrigue had always been her weapon—and now that Gilmer was gone and she stood by the Great Throne . . .

Kieron cursed her roundly under his breath. Nevitta spoke the truth. There was Ivane's hand in this, as surely as the stars made Galaxies!

Three weeks wasted. Long weeks. Twenty-one full days since their ships had touched the Imperial City. Days of fighting through the swarms of dilettantes and favor-seekers that thronged the Imperial Palace. There had been times when Kieron had wanted to cut a path through the fawning dandies with his sword!

Gilmer of Kaidor lay dead a full year and still the new Court was a madhouse of simpering sycophants. Petitions were being granted by the score as the favorites collected their long-delayed largess from the boy-Emperor Toran. And Kieron knew well enough that whatever favors were granted came through the ambitious hands of the Consort Ivane. She might not be allowed to wear the crown of an Empress without the blood of the Thousand Emperors in her veins, but by now no one at Court denied that she was the fountainhead of Imperial favor. Yet that wasn't really enough for her, Kieron knew. Ivane dreamed of better things. And because of all this hidden by-play, the old favorites of the warrior Gilmer were snubbed and

refused audience. A new inner circle was building, and Kieron of Valkyr was not—it was plain to see—to be included. He was prevented even from presenting his just complaints to the Emperor Toran.

OTHER MATTERS, he was told again and again, occupied His Imperial Majesty's attention. Other matters! Kieron could feel the anger hot and throbbing in his veins. What other matters could there be of more importance to a sovereign than the loyalty of his finest fighting men? Or if Toran was a fool as the courtiers privately claimed, then surely Ivane had more intelligence than to keep a Warlord of the Outer Marches cooling his heels in antechambers for three weeks! The Lady Ivane, herself so proud, should know how near to rebellion were the warrior peoples of the Periphery.

Under such deliberate provocations it was difficult to loyally ignore the invitation of Freka of Kalgan to meet with the other star-kings in grievance council. Rebellion was not alluring to one like Kieron who had spent his boyhood fighting beside Gilmer, but there was a limit to human endurance, and he was fast reaching it.

"Nevitta," Kieron spoke abruptly. "Were you able to find out anything concerning the Lady Alys?"

The grizzled warrior shook his head. "Nothing but the common talk. It is said that she has secluded herself, still mourning for Gilmer. You know, Kieron, how the little princess loved her father."

The lord of Valkyr frowned thoughtfully. Yes, it was true enough that Alys had loved Gilmer. He could remember her at the great Emperor's side after the battle of Kaidor. Even the conquered interregal lords of that world had claimed that Gilmer would have surrendered the planet if they had been able to capture his daughter. The bond between father and daughter had been a close one. Possibly Alys *had* secluded herself to carry on with her mourning—but Kieron doubted it. That would not have been Gilmer's way, nor his daughter's.

"Things would be different here," said Nevitta with feeling, "if the little princess ruled instead of Toran."

Very different, thought Kieron. The foolish Toran bid fair to lose what four

generations of loyal fighters had built up out of the rubble of the dark ages. Alys, the warrior princess, would add to the glory of the Imperium, not detract from it. But perhaps he was prejudiced in her favor, reflected Kieron. It was hard not to be.

He recalled her laughing eyes and her courage. A slim child, direct in manner and bearing. Embarrassing him before his roaring Valkyrs with her forthright protestations of love. The armies had worshipped her. A lovely child—with pride of race written into her patrician face. But compassionate, too. Gravely comforting the dying and the wounded with a touch or a word.

Eight years had passed since bloody Kaidor. The child of twelve would be a woman now. And, thought Kieron anxiously, a threat to the ascendant power of the Consort Ivane . . .

THE TALL BRONZE DOORS swung open suddenly, and Kieron turned. But it was not the Emperor who stood there framed in the archway, nor even the Consort. It was the gem-bedecked figure of Landor, the First Lord of Space.

Kieron snorted derisively. First Lord! The shades of the mighty fighters who had carried that title through a thousand of Imperial Earth's battles must have been sickened by young Toran's . . . or Ivane's . . . choice of the mincing courtier who now stood before him.

The more cynical courtiers said that Landor had won his honors in Ivane's bed, and Kieron could well believe it. Out in the vast emptinesses of the Edge men lived by different standards. Out there a woman was a woman—a thing to be loved or beaten, cherished or enjoyed and cast off—but not a touchstone to wealth and power. Kieron had loathed Landor on sight, and there was reason enough to believe that the First Lord reciprocated most completely. It was not wise for anyone, even a Warlord, to openly scorn the Consort's favorites—but restraint was not one of the lord of Valkyr's virtues, though even Nevitta warned him to take care. Assassination was a fine art in the Imperial City, and one amply subsidized by the First Lord of Space.

"Well, Landor?" Kieron demanded, dis-

daining to use Landor's title.

Landor's smoothly handsome features showed no expression. The pale eyes veiled like a serpent's.

"I regret," the First Lord of Space said easily, "that His Imperial Majesty has retired for the night, Valkyr. Under the circumstances . . ." He spread his slender hands in a gesture of helplessness.

The lie was obvious. Through the open doorway of the royal chambers came the murmuring sound of laughter and the reedy melody of a minstrel's pipes in the age-old ballad of *Lady Greensleeves*. Kieron could hear Toran's uncertain voice singing:

*Greensleeves was all my joy,
Greensleeves was all my joy,
And who but Lady Greensleeves?"*

Kieron could imagine the boy—lolling foolishly before the glittering Ivane, trying to win with verses what any man could have for a pledge of loyalty to the Consort.

The Valkyr glared at Landor. "I'm not to be received, is that it? By the Seven Hells, why don't you say what you mean?"

Landor's smile was scornful. "You outworlders! You should learn how to behave, really. Perhaps later . . ."

"Later be damned!" snapped Kieron. "My people are starving *now*! Your grubbing tax-gatherers are wringing us dry! How long do you think they'll stand for it? How long do you imagine I will stand for it?"

"Threats, Valkyr?" asked the First Lord, his eyes suddenly venomous. "Threats against your Emperor? Men have been whipped to death for much less."

"Not men of Valkyr," retorted Kieron. "The men of Valkyr no longer hold the favored position they once did, Kieron. I counsel you to remember that."

"True enough," Kieron replied scornfully. "Under Gilmer, fighting men were the power of the Empire. Now Toran rules with the hands of women . . . and dancing masters."

THE FIRST LORD'S FACE darkened at the insult. He laid a hand on the hilt of his ornate sword, but the Valkyr's eyes remained insolent. The huge Nevitta stirred, measuring the Pleiadene

Janizaries at the door, ready for trouble.

But Landor had no stomach for sword-play—particularly with as young and supple a fighter as the Warlord of Valkyr. His own ready tongue was a better weapon than steel. With an effort, he forced himself to smile. It was a cold smile, pregnant with subtle danger.

"Harsh words, Valkyr. And unwise. I shall not forget them. I doubt that you will be able to see His Majesty, since I do not believe the tribulations of a planet of savages would concern him. You waste your time here. If you have other business, you had better be about it."

It was Kieron's turn to feel the hot goad of anger. "Are those Toran's words or Ivane's dancing master?"

"The Consort Ivane, of course, agrees. If your people cannot pay their taxes, let them sell a few of their brats into service," Landor said smoothly.

The die was cast, then, thought Kieron furiously. All hope for an adjustment from Toran was gone and only one course lay open to him now.

"Nevitta! See that our men and horses are loaded tonight and the ships made ready for space!"

Nevitta saluted and turned to go. He paused, looked insolently at the First Lord, and deliberately spat on the floor. Then he was gone, his spurs ringing metallically as he disappeared through the high curving archway.

"Savage," muttered Landor.

"Savage enough to be loyal and worthy of any trust," said Kieron; "but you would know nothing of that."

Landor ignored the thrust. "Where do you go now, Valkyr?"

"Off-world."

"Of course," Landor smiled thinly, his eyebrows arching over pale, shrewd eyes. "Off-world."

Kieron felt a stab of suspicion. How much did Landor know? Had his spies pierced Freka the Unknown's counter-espionage cordon and brought word of the star-kings gathering on Kalgan?

"It cannot concern you where I go now, Landor," said Kieron grimly. "You've won here. But . . ." Kieron stepped a pace nearer the resplendent favorite. "Warn your tax-gatherers to go armed when they land on Valkyr. Well armed, Landor."

Kieron turned on his heel and strode out of the antechamber, his booted heels staccato on the flagstones, silver cape flaunting like a proud banner.

II

PAST THE TALL ARCH OF THE Emperor's antechamber lay the Hail of the Thousand Emperors. Kieron strode through it, the flickering flames of the wall-sconces casting long shadows out behind him—shadows that danced and whirled on the tapestried walls and touched the composed faces of the great men of Earth.

These were brooding men; men who stared down at him out of their thousand pasts. Men who had stood with a planet for a throne and watched their Empire passing in ordered glory from horizon to horizon across the night sky of Earth—men worshipped as gods on out-world planets, who watched and guided the tide of Empire until it crashed thundering on the shores of ten thousand worlds beyond Vega and Altair. Men who sat cloaked in sable robes with diamond stars encrusted and saw their civilization built out from the Great Throne, tier on shining tier until at last it reached the Edge and strained across the awful gulf for the terrible seetee suns of mighty Andromeda itself . . .

The last few of the men like gods had watched the First Empire crumble. They had seen the wave of annihilation sweeping in from the Outer Marches of the Periphery; had seen their gem-bright civilization shattered with destructive forces so hideous that the spectre of the Great Destroyer hung like a mantle of death over the Galaxy, a thing to be shunned and feared forever. And thus had come the Interregnum.

Kieron had no eyes for these brooding giants; his world was not the world they had known. It was in the next chamber that the out-world warrior paused. It was a vast and empty place. Here there were but five figures and space for a thousand more. This was the Empire that Kieron knew. This Empire he had fought for and helped secure; a savage, darkling thing spawned in the dark ages of the Interregnum, a Galaxy-spanning fief of star-

kings and serfs—of warlocks and space-ships—of light and shadow. This Empire had been born in the agony of a Galaxy and tempered in the bitter internecine wars of reconquest.

Before the image of Gilmer of Kaidor, Kieron stopped. He stood in silence, looking into the face of his dead liege. The hour was late and the Hall deserted. Kieron knelt, suddenly filled with sadness. He was on his way to rebellion against the Empire that he had helped this stern-faced man to expand and hold—rebellion against the power of Imperial Earth, personified by the weak-faced boy standing draped in the sable mantle of sovereignty in the next niche. Kieron looked from father to son. By its composure and its nearness to the magnetic features of the great Gilmer, the face of young Toran seemed to draw character and strength. It was an illusion, Kieron knew.

The young Valkyr felt driven hard. His people hungered. Military service was no longer enough for the Imperial Government as it had been for decades. Money was demanded, and there was no money on Valkyr. So the people hungered—and Kieron was their lord. He could not stand by and see the agony on the faces of his warrior maids as their children weakened, nor could he see his proud warriors selling themselves into slavery for a handful of coins. The Emperor would not listen. Kieron had recourse only to the one thing he knew . . . the sword.

He bowed his head and asked the shade of Gilmer for forgiveness.

A SLIGHT MOVEMENT caught his battle-sharpened eye as someone stirred behind a fluted column. Kieron's sword whispered as it slid from the scabbard, the gemmed hilt casting shards of light into the dimness of the colonnade.

Treading softly, Kieron eased his tall frame into the shadows, weapon alert. The thought of assassination flashed across his mind and he smiled grimly. Could it be that Landor had his hirelings after him already?

Kieron saw the shadowy shape slip from the colonnade out onto the great curving terrace that bordered the entire west wing of the Palace. Eyes narrowed under his black brows, the lord of Valkyr followed.

The stars gleamed in the moonless night, and far below, Kieron could see the flickering torchlights of the Imperial City fanning out to the horizon like the spokes of some fantastic, glittering wheel. The dark figure ahead had vanished.

Kieron sheathed his sword and drew his poniard. It was far too dark for sword-play, and he did not wish to risk letting the assassin escape. Melting into the shadows of the colonnade again, he made his way parallel to the terrace, alert for any sign of movement. Presently, the figure appeared again beside the balustrade, and the Valkyr moved swiftly and quietly up behind. With a cat-like movement, he slipped his free arm about the slight shape, pulling it tight against himself. The poniard flashed in his upraised hand, the slender blade reflecting the starlight.

The weapon did not descend . . .

Against his forearm, Kieron felt a yielding softness, and the hair that brushed his cheek was warm and perfumed.

He stood transfixed. The girl twisted in his grasp and broke free with a gasping cry. Instantly, a blade gleamed in her hand and she had launched herself at the Valkyr furiously. Her voice was tight with rage.

"Murdering butcher! *You dare . . .!*"

Kieron caught her upraised arm and wrenched the dagger from her grasp. She clawed at him, kicking, biting, but never once calling aloud for aid. At last Kieron was able to pin her to a column with his weight, and he held her there, arms pinned to her sides.

"You hellcat!" he muttered against her hair, "Who are you?"

"You know well enough, you murdering lackey! Why don't you kill me and go collect your pay, damn you!" gritted the girl furiously. "Must you manhandle me too?"

Kieron gasped. "*I kill you!*" He caught the girl's hair and pulled her head back so that her features would catch the faint glow of light from the city below. "Who are you, hellcat?"

The light outlined his own features and the Arms of Valkyr on the clasp of his cloak at his throat. The girl's eyes widened. Slowly the tenseness went out of her and she relaxed against him.

"Kieron! Kieron of Valkyr!"

KIERON WAS STILL ALERT for some trick. Landor could have hired a female assassin just as well as a man.

"You know me?" he asked cautiously.

"Know you!" She laughed suddenly, and it was a silvery sound in the night. "I loved you . . . beast!"

"By the Seven Hells, you speak in riddles! Who are you?" the Valkyr demanded irritably.

"And I thought you had come to kill me," mused the girl in self-reproach. "My own Kieron!"

"I'm not your Kieron or anyone else's, Lady," said Kieron rather stiffly, "and you'd better explain why you were watching me in the Hall of Emperors before I'll let you go."

"My father warned me that you would forget me. I did not think you would be so cruel," she taunted.

"I knew your father?"

"Well enough, I think."

"I've had a hundred wenches—and known some of their fathers, too. You can't expect me to . . ."

"Not *this* wench, Valkyr!" the girl exploded furiously.

The tone carried such command that Kieron involuntarily stepped back, but still keeping the girl's hands pinned to her sides.

"If you had spoken so on Kaidor, I'd have had the skin stripped from your back, outworld savage!" she cried.

Kaidor! Kieron felt the blood drain away from his face. This, then, was . . . Alys.

"Ha! So you remember now! Kaidor you can recall, but you have forgotten me! Kieron, you always were a beast!"

Kieron felt a smile spreading across his face. It was good to smile again. And it was good to know that Alys was . . . safe.

"Highness . . ."

"Don't 'Highness' me!"

"Alys, then. Forgive me. I could not have known you. After all it has been eight years . . ."

"And there have been a hundred wenches . . ." mimicked the girl angrily.

Kieron grinned. "There really haven't been that many. I boasted."

"Any would be too many!"

"You haven't changed, Alys, except that you . . ."

"Have grown so? Spare me that!" She glared at him, eyes flaming in the shadows. Then suddenly she was laughing again, a silvery laugh that hung like a bright thread in the soft tapestry of night sounds. "Oh, Kieron, it is good to see you again!"

"I thought to hear from you, Alys, when we reached Earth—but there was nothing. No word of any kind. I was told you were in seclusion still mourning Gilmer."

ALYS BOWED HER HEAD. "I will never stop mourning him." She looked up, her eyes suddenly bright with unshed tears. "Nor will you. I saw you kneeling inside. I thought then that it might be you. No one kneels to Gilmer now but the old comrades." She walked to the balustrade and stood looking out over the lights of the Imperial City. Kieron watched the play of emotions over her face, caught suddenly by her beauty.

"I tried to reach you, Kieron—tried hard. But my servants have been taken from me since I was caught spying on Ivane. And I'm kept under cover now, permitted out only after dark—and then only on the Palace grounds. Ivane has convinced Toran that I'm dangerous. The people like me because I was father's favorite. My poor stupid little brother! How that woman rules him . . .!"

Kieron was aghast. "You spied on Ivane? In heaven's name, why?"

"That woman is a born plotter, Kieron. She isn't satisfied with a Consort's coronet. She's brewing something. Emmisaries have come to her from certain of the star-kings and *others* . . ."

"Others?"

Alys' voice was hushed. "A warlock, Kieron! He has been seeing Ivane privately for more than a year. An awful man!"

Superstition stirred like a quickening devil inside the Valkyr. The shuddering horror of the dark and bloody tales he had heard all his life about the warlocks who clung to the knowledge of the Great Destroyer rose like a wave of blackness within him.

Alys felt the same dark tide rising in her. She moved closer to Kieron, her slim body trembling slightly against his. "The people would tear Ivane to pieces if

they knew," she whispered.

"You saw this warlock?" asked Kieron, sick with dread.

Alys nodded soundlessly.

Kieron fought down his fears and wondered uneasily what Ivane's connection could be with such a pariah. The warlocks and witches were despised and feared above all other creatures in the Galaxy.

"His name?" Kieron asked.

"Geller. Geller of the Marshes. It is said that he is a conjurer of devils . . . *and that he can create homunculi!* Out of the very filth of the marshes! Oh, Kieron!" Alys shuddered.

An awful plan was forming in Kieron's mind. He was thinking that Ivane must be stripped of the sigils and powers of this devil-man. With such powers at her command there might be nothing impossible of attainment. Even the crown of the Imperium itself . . .

"Where," Kieron asked slowly, "can this warlock be found?"

"On the street of the Black Flame, in the city of Neg . . . on Kalgan."

"*Kalgan!*" Kieron's heart contracted. Was there a connection? Kalgan! What had Ivane to do with that lonely planet beyond the dark veil of the Coalsack? Was it coincidence? Out of all the thousands of worlds in space . . . Kalgan.

"Is there something wrong, Kieron? You know this man?"

Kieron shook his head. It had suddenly become more than imperative that he go to Kalgan. The mystery of the Imperial Consort's connection with a warlock of Kalgan must be unraveled. And the starlings were gathering . . .

The Valkyr was suddenly taken with a new and different fear. If Alys had spied on Ivane, then she must be in danger here. Ivane would never tolerate interference with her plans from Gilmer's daughter.

"Alys, are you a prisoner here?"

"More, I'm afraid," the girl said sadly. "I'm a reminder to Toran of the days of our father. One that he would like to eliminate, I think."

KIERON STUDIED HER in the starlight. His eyes sought the thick golden hair that brushed her shoulders, the glittering metallic skirt that hung low on her hips, outlining the slim thighs. He

watched the graceful line of her unadorned throat, the bare shoulders and breasts, the small waist, the flat, firm stomach—all revealed by the studied nakedness of the fashions of the Inner Marches. This was no child. The thought of her in danger shook him badly.

"Toran would not dare harm you, Alys," said Kieron uncertainly. There had been a time when he could have said such a thing with perfect assurance, but since the death of Gilmer, the Imperial City was like an over-civilized jungle—full of beasts of prey.

"No, Toran wouldn't . . . alone," said Alys; "but there are Ivane and Landor." She laughed, suddenly gay; her eyes, seeking Kieron's, were shining. "But not now! You are here, Kieron!"

The Valkyr felt his heart contract. "Alys," he said softly, "I leave Earth tonight. For Kalgan."

"For Kalgan, Kieron?" Alys' eyes widened. "To seek that warlock?"

"For another reason, Alys." Kieron paused uneasily. It was hard to speak to Gilmer of Kaidor's daughter about rebellion. Yet he could not lie to her. He temporized.

"I have business with the lord of Kalgan," he said.

Alys' face was shadowed and her voice when she spoke was sad. "Do the starlings gather, Kieron? Have they had all they can stand of Toran's foolish rule?"

Kieron nodded wordlessly.

The girl flared up with a sudden imperious anger. "That fool! He is letting the favorites drive the Empire to ruin!" She looked up at Kieron pleadingly. "Promise me one thing, Kieron."

"If I can."

"That you will not commit yourself to any rebellion until we have spoken again."

"Alys, I . . ."

"Oh, Kieron! Promise me! If there is no other way, then fight the Imperial House. But give me one chance to save what my father and his father died for . . .!"

"And mine," added Kieron sombrely.

"You know that if there is no other way, I won't try to dissuade you. But while you are on Kalgan, I'll speak to Toran. Please, Kieron, promise me that Valkyr will not rebel until we have tried

everything." Her eyes shone with passion. "Then if it comes to war, I'll ride by your side!"

"Done, Alys," said Kieron slowly. "But take care when you speak to Toran. Remember there is danger here for you." He wondered briefly what Freka the Unknown would think of his sudden reluctance to commit the hundred spaceships and five thousand warriors of Valkyr to the coming rebellion. A thought struck him and quickly he discarded it. For just an instant he had wondered if Geller of the Marshes and the mysterious Freka the Unknown might be the same . . . Stranger things had happened. But Alys had described Geller as old, and Freka was known to be a six-and-one-half foot warrior, the perfect 'type' of the star-king caste.

"One thing more, Alys," Kieron said; "I will leave one of my vessels here for your use. Nevitta and a company will remain, too. Keep them by you. They will guard you with their lives." He slipped his arm about her, holding her to him.

"Nevitta?" Alys said with a slow smile. "Nevitta of the yellow braids and the great sword? I remember him."

"The braids are greying, but the sword is as long as ever. He can guard you for me, and keep you safe."

The girl's smile deepened at the words 'for me' but Kieron did not notice. He was deep in planning. "Be very careful, Alys. And watch out for Landor."

"Yes, Kieron," the girl breathed meekly. She looked up at the tall outworld warrior's face, lips parted.

But Kieron was looking up at the stars of the Empire, and there was uneasiness in his heart. He tightened his arm about Alys, holding her closer to him as though to protect her from the hot gaze of those fiery stars.

III

THE SPACESHIP WAS ANCIENT, yet the mysterious force of the Great Destroyer chained within the sealed coils between the hulls drove it with unthinkable speed across the star-shot darkness. The interior was close and smoky, for the only light came from oil lamps turned low to slow the fouling of the air. Once, there had been light without fire in the thousand-

foot hulls, but the tiny orbs set into the ceilings had failed for they were not of a kind with the force in the sealed, eternal coils.

On the lower decks, the horses of the small party of Valkyr warriors aboard stomped the steel deck-plates, impatient in their close confinement; while in the tiny bubble of glass at the very prow of the ancient vessel, two shamen of the hereditary caste of Navigators drove the pulsing starship toward the spot beyond the veil of the Coalsack where their astrolabes and armillary spheres told them that the misty globe of Kalgan lay.

Many men—risking indictment as warlocks or sorcerers—had tried to probe the secrets of the Great Destroyer and compute the speed of these mighty spacecraft of antiquity. Some had even claimed a speed of 100,000 miles per hour for them. But since the starships made the voyage from Earth to the agricultural worlds of Proxima Centauri in slightly less than twenty-eight hours, such calculations would place the nearest star-system an astounding *two million eight hundred thousand* miles from Earth—a figure that was as absurd to all Navigators as it was inconceivable to laymen.

The great spaceship bearing the Warlord of Valkyr's blazon solidified into reality near Kalgan as its great velocity diminished. It circled the planet to kill speed and nosed down into the damp air of the grey world. The high cloud cover passed, it slanted down into slightly clearer air. Kalgan did not rotate: in its slow orbit around the red giant parent star, the planet turned first one face, and then another to the slight heat of its sun. Great oceans covered the poles, and the central land mass was like a craggy girdle of rock and soil around the bulging equator. Only in the twilight zone was life enduring, and the city of Neg, stronghold of Freka the Unknown, was the only urban grouping on the planet.

Neg lay sullen in the eternal twilight when at last Kieron's spaceship landed outside the gates and the debarkation of his retinue had begun; the spaceport, however, was ablaze with flares and torches, and the lord of Kalgan had sent a corps of drummers—signal honors—to greet the visiting star-king. The hot, misty night air

throbbed with the beat of the huge kettle-drums, and weapons and jewelled harness flashed in the yellow light of the flames.

At last the debarkation was complete, and Kieron and his warriors were led by a torch-bearing procession of soldiery into the fortified city of Neg—along ancient cobbled streets—through small crowded squares—and finally to the Citadel of Neg itself. The residence of Freka the Unknown, Lord of Kalgan.

The people they passed were a silent, sullen lot. Dull, brutish faces. The faces of slaves and serfs held in bondage by fear and force. These people, Kieron reflected, would go mad in a carnival of destruction if the heavy hand of their lord should falter.

He turned his attention from the people of Neg to the massive Citadel. It was a powerful keep with high walls and turreted outworks. It spoke of Kalgan's bloody history in every squat, functional line. A history of endless rebellion and uprising, of coups and upheavals. Warrior after warrior had set himself up as ruler of this sullen world only to fall before the assaults of his own vassals. It had ever been the policy of the Imperial Government never to interfere with these purely local affairs. It was felt that out of the crucibles of domestic strife would arise the best fighting men, and they, in turn, could serve the Imperium. As long as Kalgan produced its levy of fighting men and spaceships, no one on Earth cared about the local government. So Kalgan wallowed in blood.

Out of the last nightmare had come Freka. He had risen rapidly to power on Kalgan—and *stayed* in power. Hated by his people, he nevertheless ruled harshly, for that was his way. Kieron had been told that this warrior who had sprung out of nowhere was different from other men. The Imperial courtiers claimed that he cared nothing for wine or women, and that he loved only battle. It would take such a man, thought Kieron studying the Citadel, to take and hold a world like Kalgan. It would take such a man to want it!

If Freka of Kalgan loved bloodshed, he would be happy when this coming council of star-kings ended, the Valkyr reflected moodily. He knew himself how near to rebellion he was, and the other lords of the

Outer Marches, the lords of Auriga, Doorn, Quintain, Helia—all were ready to strike the Imperial crown from Toran's foolish head.

KIERON WAS ESCORTED with his warriors to a luxurious suite within the Citadel. Freka, he was informed, regretted his inability to greet him personally, but intended to meet all the gathered star-kings in the Great Hall within twelve hours. Meanwhile, there would be entertainment for the visiting warriors, and the hospitality of Kalgan. Which hospitality, claimed the hawk-faced steward pridefully, was without peer in the known Universe!

An imp of perversity stirred in Kieron. He found that he did not completely trust Freka of Kalgan. There was a premeditated cold-bloodedness about this whole business of the star-kings' grievance council that alerted him to danger. There should have been less smoothness and efficiency in the way the visitors were handled, Kieron thought illogically, remembering the troubles he, himself, had gone to whenever outworld rulers had visited Valkyr. He was suddenly glad that he had warned Nevitta to use extreme caution should it be necessary to bring Alys to Kalgan. It was possible he was being over-suspicious, but he could not forget that Alys herself had seen a warlock from Kalgan in familiar conversation with the woman really to blame for the danger that smouldered red among the worlds of the Empire.

The drums told the Valkyr that the other star-kings were arriving. Torches flared in the courtyards of the Citadel, and the hissing roar of spaceships landing told of the eagles gathering.

Through the long, featureless twilight, the sounds continued. Freka made no appearances, but the promised entertainment was forthcoming and lavish. Food and wine in profusion were brought to the apartments of the Valkyrs. Musicians and minstrels came too, to sing and play the love songs and warchants of ancient Valkyr while the warriors roared approval.

Kieron sat on the high seat reserved for him and watched the dancing yellow light of the flambeaux light up the stone rooms and play across the ruddy faces of his warriors as they drank and gamed and quarreled.

Dancing girls were sent them, and the Valkyrs howled with savage pleasure as the naked bodies, glistening with scented oils, gyrated in the barbaric rhythms of the sword dances steel whirring in bright arcs above the tawny heads. The long, gloomy twilight passed unregretted in the warm, flame-splashed closeness of the Citadel. Kieron watched thoughtfully as more women and fiery vintages were brought into the merrymaking. The finest wines and the best women were passed hand to hand over the heads of laughing warriors to Kieron's place, and he drank deeply of both. The wines were heady, the full lips of the sybaritic houris bittersweet, but Kieron smiled inwardly—if Freka the Unknown sought to bring him into the gathering of the star-kings drunk and satiated and amenable to suggestion, the lord of Kalgan knew little of the capacity of the men of the Edge.

The hours passed and revelry filled the Citadel of Neg. Life on the outer worlds was harsh, and the gathering warriors took full measure of the pleasures placed at their disposal by the lord of Kalgan. The misty, eternal dusk rang with the drinking songs and battle-cries, the quarreling and lovemaking of warriors from a dozen outworld planets. Each star-king, Kieron knew, was being entertained separately, plied with wine and woman-flesh until the hour for the meeting came.

The sands had run their course in the glass five times before the trumpets blared through the Citadel, calling the lords to the meeting. Kieron left his men to enjoy themselves, and with an attendant in the harness of Kalgan made his way toward the Great Hall.

Through dark passageways that reeked of ancient violence, by walls hung with tapestries and antique weapons, they went; over flagstones worn smooth by generations. This keep had been old when the reconquering heirs to the Thousand Emperors rode their chargers into the Great Hall and dictated their peace terms to the interregal lords of Kalgan.

THE HALL was a vast, vaulted stone room filled with the smoky heat of torches and many bodies. It teemed with be-jewelled warriors, star-kings, warlords, aides and attendants. For just a moment

the lord of Valkyr regretted having come into the impressive gathering alone. Yet it was unimportant. These men were—for the most part—his peers and friends; the warrior kings of the Edge.

Odo of Helia was there, filling the room with his great laughter; and Theron, the Lord of Auriga; Kleph of Quintain; and others. Many others. Kieron saw the white mane of his father's friend Eric, the Warlord of Doorn, the great Red Sun beyond the Horsehead Nebula. Here was an aggregation of might to give even a Galactic Emperor pause. The warlike worlds of the Edge, gathered on Kalgan to decide the issue of war against the uneasy crown of Imperial Earth.

Questions coursed through Kieron's mind as he stood among the star-kings. Alys—pleading with Toran—what success could she have against the insidious power of the Consort? Was Alys in danger? And there was Geller, the mysterious warlock of the Marshes. Kieron felt he must seek out the man. There were questions that only Geller could answer. Yet at the thought of a warlock—a familiar of the Great Destroyer—Kieron's blood ran cold.

The Valkyr looked about him. That there was power enough here to crush the forces of Earth, there was no doubt. But what then? When Toran was stripped of his power, who would wear the crown? The Empire was a necessity—without it the dark ages of the Interregnum would fall again. For four generations the mantle of shadows had hovered over the youngling Second Empire. Not even the most savage wanted a return of the lost years of isolation. The Empire must live. But the Empire would need a titular head. If not Toran, the foolish weak boy, then who? Kieron's suspicions stirred. . . .

A rumble of tympani announced the entrance of the host. The murmuring voices grew still. Freka the Unknown had entered the Great Hall.

Kieron stared. The man was—magnificent! The tall figure was muscled like a statue from the Dawn Age; sinews rippling under the golden hide like oiled machinery, grace and power in every movement. A mane of hair the color of fire framed a face of classic purity—ascetic, almost inhuman in its perfection.

The pale eyes that swept the assemblage were like drops of molten silver. Hot, but with a cold heat that seared with an icy touch. Kieron shivered. This man was already half a god. . . .

Yet there was something in Freka that stirred resentment in the Valkyr. Some indefinable lack that was sensed rather than seen. Kieron knew he looked upon a magnificent star-king, but there was no warmth in the man.

Kieron fought down the unreasonable dislike. It was not his way to judge men so emotionally. *Perhaps*, thought the Valkyr, *I imagine the coldness*. But it was there!

Yet when Freka spoke, the feeling vanished, and Kieron felt himself transported by the timbre and resonant power of the voice.

"Star-kings of the Empire!" Freka cried, and the sound of his words rolled out over the gathering like a wave, gaining power even as he continued: "For more than a hundred years you and your fathers have fought for the glory and gain of the Great Throne! Under Gilner of Kaidor you carried the gonfalon of Imperial Earth to the Edge and planted it there under the light of Andromeda itself! Your blood was shed and your treasure spent for the new Emperors! And what is your reward? *The heavy hand of a fool!* Your people writhe under the burden of excessive taxation—your women starve and your children are sold into slavery! You are in bondage to a foolish boy who squats like a toad on the Great Throne. . . ."

KIERON LISTENED BREATHLESSLY as Freka of Kalgan wove a web of half-truths around the assembled warriors. The compelling power of the man was astounding.

"The worlds writhe in the grip of an idiot! Helia, Doorn, Auriga, Valkyr, Quintain. . . ." He called the roll of the warrior worlds. "Yes, and Kalgan, too! There is not enough wealth in the Universe to satiate Toran and the Great Throne! And the Court laughs at our complaints! At us! The star-kings who are the fists of the Empire! How long will we endure it? How long will we maintain Toran on a throne that he is too weak to hold?"

Toran, thought Kieron grimly, always Toran. Never a word of Ivane or Landor or the favorites who twisted Toran around their fingers.

Freka's voice dropped low and he leaned out over the first row of upturned faces. "I call upon you—as you love your people and your freedom—to join with Kalgan and rid the Empire of this weakling and his money-grubbing and neglect!"

In the crowd, someone stirred. All but this one seemed hypnotized. It was old Eric of Doorn who stepped forward.

"You speak treason! You brought us here to discuss grievances, and you preach rebellion and treason, I say!" he shouted angrily.

Freka turned cold eyes on the old warrior.

"If this is treason," he said ominously, "it is the Emperor's treason—not ours."

Eric of Doorn seemed to wilt under the icy gaze of those inhuman eyes. Kieron watched him step back into the circle of his followers, fear in his aging face. There was a power in Freka to quell almost any insurrection here, thought the Valkyr uneasily. He, himself, was bound by the promise he had made to Alys, but it was only that that kept him from casting in his lot with the compelling lord of Kalgan. Such a feeling was unreason itself, he knew, and he fought against it, drawing on his reserves of information to strengthen his resolve to obstruct Freka if he could. Yet it was easy to understand how this strange man had sprung out of obscurity and made himself master of Kalgan. Freka was a creature made for leadership.

Kieron stood away from the crowd and forced himself to speak. All his earlier suspicions were growing like a suffocating cloud within him. Someone was being fooled and used, and it was *not* the lord of Kalgan!

"You, Freka!" he cried, and the lords turned to listen. "You shout of getting rid of Toran—but what do you offer in his place?"

Freka's eyes were like steel now, glinting dully in the light of the wall-torches.

"Not myself. Is that what you feared?" The fine mouth curled scornfully. "I ask no man to lay down his life so that I may take for myself the Great Throne and

the sable mantle of Emperor! I renounce here and now any claim to the Imperial Crown! When the time is right, I will make my wishes known."

The crowd of star-kings murmured approvingly. Freka had won them.

"A vote!" someone cried. "Those who are with Freka and against Toran! A vote!"

Swords leaped from scabbards and glittered in the torchlight while the chamber rang to a savage cheer. Here was war and loot to satisfy the savage heart! The sack of Imperial Earth herself! Even old Eric of Doorn's sword was reluctantly raised. Kieron alone remained silent, sword sheathed.

Freka looked down at him coldly.

"Well, Valkyr? Do you ride with us?"

"I need more time to consider," said Kieron carefully.

Freka's laughter was like a lash. "Time! Time to worry about risking his skin! Valkyr needs time!"

Kieron felt his quick anger surging. The blood pounded in his temples, throbbing, pulsing, goading him to fight. His hand closed on the hilt of his sword and it slipped half out of the sheath. But Kieron caught himself. There was something sinister in this deliberate attempt to ruin him—to brand him a coward before his peers. A man faced two choices here, apparently; follow Freka into rebellion, or be branded craven. Kieron glared into the cold eyes of the Kalgan lord. The temptation to challenge him was strong—as strong as Kieron's whole background and training in the harsh warrior-code of the Edge. But he could not. Not yet. There were too many irons in the fire to be watched. There was Alys and her plea to Toran. There was the plight of his people. He could not risk the danger to himself of driving a blade through Freka's throat, no matter how his blood boiled with rage.

He turned on his heel and strode from the Great Hall, the laughter of Freka and the star-kings ringing mockingly in his ears.

IV

KIERON AWOKE IN DARKNESS. Of the fire on the hearth, only embers remained and the stone rooms were silent

but for the sound of sleeping men. The single Valkyr sentry was at his elbow, whispering him into wakefulness. Kieron threw back the fur coverlets and swung his feet over the edge of the low couch.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nevitta, sir."

"Nevitta! Here?" Kieron sprang to his feet, fully awake now. "Is there a woman with him?"

"A slave-girl, sir. They wait in the outer chamber."

Kieron reached for his harness and weapons, threading his way through his sleeping men. In the dimly lit antechamber, Nevitta stood near the muffled figure of Alys. Kieron went immediately to the girl, and she threw back her hood, baring her golden head to the torchlight. Her eyes were bright with the pleasure of seeing Kieron again, but there was anger in them, too. The lord of Valkyr knew at once that she had not succeeded with Toran.

"What happened, Nevitta?"

"An attempt was made on the little, princess' life, sir."

"What?" Kieron felt the blood drain from his face.

"As I say, Kieron." The old Valkyr's face was grim. "We had to fight our way out of the Palace."

"I never had a chance to speak to Toran," the girl said sombrely. "It was all that could be done to reach the spaceship. Even the Janizaries tried to stop us. Two of your men died for me, Kieron."

"Who did this thing?" asked Kieron ominously.

"The men who attacked the princess' quarters," said Nevitta deliberately, "wore the harness of Kalgan."

That hit Kieron like a physical blow . . . hard. "*Kalgan!* And you brought her *here?* You fool, Nevitta!"

The old Valkyr nodded agreement. "Yes, Kieron. Fool is the proper word . . ."

"No!" Alys spoke up imperiously. "It was my command that brought us here. I insisted."

"By the Seven Hells! Why?" demanded Kieron. "Why here? You could have been safe on Valkyr! I know it was my order to bring you here, but after what happened . . ."

"The princess would not hear of seeking safety, Kieron," said Nevitta. "When Kal-

gan proved its treachery by trying to assassinate her, she could think only of your danger here . . . unwarned. She would risk her life to bring you this news, Kieron."

Kieron turned to face the girl. She looked up at him, eyes bright, lips parted.

"What could make a princess risk her life . . ." Kieron began numbly.

"Kieron . . ." The girl breathed his name softly. "I was so afraid for you."

The Valkyr reached slowly for the clasp of her cloak and unfastened it. The heavy mantle dropped unnoticed to the flagstones. Alys stood, swaying slightly, parted lips inviting. Kieron watched the throbbing pulse in her white throat and felt his own pounding. He took a step toward her, his arms closing about her yielding suppleness. His mouth sought her lips.

Unnoticed, Nevitta slipped from the antechamber and silently closed the door after him . . .

KIERON STOOD before the arched window, staring out into the eternal, misty dusk of Kalgan, his heart heavy. Behind him, Alys lay on the low couch. Her bright hair lay in tumbled profusion about her face as she watched her lover at the window. Kieron turned to look at her, feeling the impact of her warm beauty. He began to pace the floor, wracking his brains for a lead to his next move in the subtle war of treachery and intrigue that had taken shape around him.

He had ordered his men ready for attack, but for the moment there was little need for that kind of vigilance. What was needed was more information. Carefully, he marshalled what few facts he had at his disposal.

The connection between Freka and the plotters in the Imperial City that he had suspected was proved at last by the attempt on Alys' life by men of Kalgan. The star-kings were being used to fight a battle not their own. But whose? Freka's . . . or Ivane's? No matter which, they were being tricked into striking the Imperial Crown from Toran's head, and the gain to them and their people would be—more oppression.

The treatment he, himself, had received in the Imperial Court made sense now.

Landor sought to drive him into the arms of Freka's revolt. Only Alys had spared him.

Now, the star-kings must be warned. But by the code of the Edge, Kieron must prove to them that he was not the craven coward that Freka's laughter had branded him. And he needed *proof*. Proof of the monstrous structure of treachery and intrigue that had sprung up out of a woman's cupidity and an unknown star-king's cold inhumanity.

Kieron stared moodily down into the damp courtyard beneath the open window. In the early dawn it was deserted. Then, quite suddenly, there was activity in the walled-in square. An officer of the Citadel guard escorted a heavily cloaked figure into the yard, and with every evidence of great respect, withdrew. The solitary figure paced the wet cobbles nervously.

Who, wondered Kieron, would be treated with such obvious obsequiousness and yet left in a back courtyard to await the summons of Freka of Kalgan? A sudden thought struck him. It could be only someone who should not be seen by the star-kings and their attendants that filled the Citadel of Neg to overflowing.

Kieron studied the cloaked nobleman with renewed interest. It seemed to him that he had seen that mincing walk before . . .

Landor!

Kieron flung open the door to the outer chamber. His startled men gathered about him. Alys was on her feet behind him. He signalled for Nevitta and four men to enter.

"Nevitta! Tear down that wall tapestry and cut it into shreds . . . Alys, tie the strips together and make a rope of it! Make certain the knots are secure enough to bear a man's weight . . . That's Landor down there!"

Kicking off his spurred boots, Kieron eased himself over the ledge of the window. The courtyard was thirty feet below, but the ancient walls of the Citadel were rough and full of the ornate projections of Interregnal architecture. Kieron let himself down, feeling the mist wet on his face. Twice he almost lost his footing and pitched to the courtyard floor. Alys stared down at him from the window, white-faced.

He was ten feet from the bottom when Landor looked up. Recognition was instant. There was a moment of stunned silence, and Kieron dropped the remaining distance to land cat-like on his feet, blade in hand.

"Kieron!" Landor's face was grey.

THE VALKYR ADVANCED purposefully. "Yes, Landor! Kieron! I wasn't supposed to see you here, was I? And you don't dare raise an outcry or the others will see you, too! That would raise quite a smell in the Consort's pretty brew, wouldn't it?"

Landor shrank back, away from the gleaming blade in Kieron's hand.

"Draw, Landor," said Kieron softly. "Draw now, or I'll kill you where you stand."

In a panic, the First Lord of Space drew his sword. He knew himself to be no match for the Valkyr star-king, and at the first touch of blades, he turned and fled for the gate. He banged hard against the heavy panels. The gate was locked. Kieron followed him deliberately.

"Cry for help, Landor," Kieron suggested with a short, hard laugh. "The place is full of fighting-men."

Landor was wild-eyed. "Why do you want to kill me, Kieron," he cried hoarsely; "what have I done to you . . .?"

"You've taxed my people and insulted me, and if that were not enough there would still be your treachery with Freka—tricking me and the others into rebellion so that Ivane can seize the crown! That's more than enough reason to kill you. Besides . . ." Kieron smiled grimly, "I just don't like you, Landor. I'd enjoy spilling some of your milky blood."

"Kieron! I swear, Kieron . . ."

"Save it, dancing master!" Kieron touched Landor's loosely held weapon with his own. "Guard yourself!"

Landor uttered an animal cry of desperation and lunged clumsily at the Valkyr. Kieron's sword made a glittering encirclement and the First Lord's weapon clattered on the cobblestones twenty feet away.

Kieron's eyes were cold as he advanced on the now thoroughly terrorized courtier. "Kneel down, Landor. A lackey should always die on his knees."

The First Lord threw himself to the

cobbles, his arms around the outworlder's knees. He was grey with fright and babbling for mercy, his eyes tightly shut. Kieron reversed his sword and brought the heavy hilt down sharply on Landor's head. The courtier sighed and pitched forward. Kieron sheathed his weapon and picked the unconscious man up like a sack of meal. Time was short. The guards would be returning to escort Landor to Freka. Kieron picked up the courtier's fallen sword. There must be no sign of struggle in the courtyard.

The Valkyr carried Landor over to where Alys and Nevitta had lowered their improvised rope. He trussed Landor up like a butchered boar and called to them. "Haul him up!"

Landor disappeared into the window and the rope came down again. Kieron climbed hand over hand after the vanished courtier. Within seconds he stood among his warriors again, and the courtyard was empty.

"LANDOR!" Kieron splashed wine in the unconscious man's face. "Landor, wake up!"

The courtier stirred and opened his eyes. Immediately they filmed with fear. A hostile circle of faces looked down at him. Kieron, his dark eyes flaming. Alys . . . the great red face of Nevitta, framed by the winged helmet . . . other savage looking Valkyrs. It was to Landor a scene from the legendary Seventh Hell of the Great Destroyer.

"If you want to live, talk," said Kieron. "What are you doing here on Kalgan? It must be a message of importance you carry. Ivane would have sent someone else if it weren't."

"I . . . I carry no message, Kieron."

Kieron nodded to Nevitta who drew his dagger and placed it against Landor's throat.

"We have no time for lies, Landor," said Kieron.

To emphasize the point, Nevitta pressed the blade tighter against the pulse in the First Lord's neck. Landor screamed.

"Don't . . .!"

"Talk—or I'll cut the glzzard out of you!" Nevitta growled.

"All right! All right! But take that knife away . . .!"

"Ivane sent you here."

Landor nodded soundlessly.

"Why?"

"I . . . I . . . was to tell Freka that . . . that his men failed to . . . to . . ."

"To kill me!" finished Alys angrily. "What else?"

"I . . . was also to tell him that the rest of the plan was . . . was . . . carried out . . . successfully."

"Damn you, don't talk in riddles!" Kieron said. "What 'plan'?"

"The . . . the Emperor is dead," Landor blurted, eyes wild with terror. "But not by my hand! I swear it! Not by my hand!"

Alys choked back a cry of pain.

"Toran! Poor . . . Toran . . ."

Kieron took the terrified courtier by the throat and shook him.

"You filthy swine! Who did it? *Who killed the Emperor?*"

"*Ivane!*" gasped Landor. "The people do not know he is dead and she awaits the star-king's invasion to proclaim herself Empress! . . . In the gods' name, Kieron, don't kill me! I speak the truth!"

"Freka helped plan this?" demanded Kieron.

"He is Ivane's man," stammered Landor, "but I know nothing of him! Nothing, Kieron! The warlock Geller brought him to Ivane five years ago . . . that is all I know!"

Geller of the Marshes . . . again. Kieron felt the awful dread seeping through his anger. Somehow the connection between Geller and Freka must be discovered. Somehow . . . !

Kieron turned away from the terrified Landor. The picture was shaping now. Freka and Ivane. The star-kings' rebellion. Toran . . . murdered.

"Keep this hound under guard!" ordered Kieron.

Landor was led away, shaken and weak. "Nevitta!"

"Sir?"

"You and the princess will go back to the ship as you came. She must be taken to safety at once. As soon as that pig is missed, we'll have visitors . . ."

"No, Kieron! I won't go!" cried Alys.

"You must. If you are captured on Kalgan now it will mean a *carte blanche* for Ivane."

"But then you must come!"

"I can't. If I tried to leave here now, Freka would detain me by force. I know his plans." He turned again to Nevitta. "She goes with you, Nevitta. By force if necessary."

"Return to Valkyr and gather the tribes. We can do nothing without men at our backs. One of the ships will remain here with me and the men. We will try to get clear after we are certain that—" He looked over at the slim girl, his eyes sombre—"that Her Majesty is safe."

The Valkyr warriors in the room straightened, a subtle change in their expression as they watched Alys. A gulf had suddenly opened between this girl and their chieftain. They felt it too. One by one they dropped to their knees before her. Alys made a protesting gesture, her eyes bright with tears. She saw the chasm opening, and fought it futilely. But when Kieron, too, went to his knees, she knew it was so. In one fleeting moment, they had changed from lover and beloved to sovereign and vassal.

She forced back the tears and raised her head proudly; as Galactic Empress, Heir-ess to the Thousand Emperors, she accepted the homage of her fighting men.

"My lord of Valkyr," she said in a low, unsteady voice. "My love and affection for you—and these warriors will never be forgotten. If we live . . ."

Kieron rose to his full height, naked sword extended in his hands.

"Your Imperial Majesty," he spoke the words formally and slowly, regretting what was gone. "The men of Valkyr are yours. To the death."

KIERON WATCHED NEVITTA and Alys vanish down the long, gloomy hall outside the Valkyr chambers—to all appearances a warrior chieftain and his slave-girl ordered away by their master. Even then, thought Kieron bleakly, there was danger. He saw them pass one sentry, two . . . three . . . They turned the corner and were gone, Kieron's hopes and fears riding with them.

Already, there were sounds of confusion in the Citadel of Neg. Men were searching for the vanished Landor. Searching quietly, reflected Kieron with grim satisfaction, for the visiting star-kings must not know that Freka the Unknown held familiar

audience with the Imperial First Lord of Space. Spur of the moment hunting parties and entertainments were keeping the visitors occupied while the Kalgan soldiery searched.

Kieron weighed his chances of escape and found them small indeed. They dared not stir from their quarters in the Citadel until the roar of Nevitta's spaceship told that the Empress was safely away. And meanwhile, the search for Landor drew nearer.

An hour passed, the sand in the glass running with agonizing slowness. Once Kieron thought he heard the beat of hooves on the drawbridge of the Citadel, but he could not be certain.

Two hours. Kieron paced the floor of the Valkyr chambers, his twelve remaining warriors armed, alert, watching him. Nervously he fingered the hilt of his sword.

Another hour in the grey, eternal twilight. Still no sound of a spaceship rising. Kieron's anxiety grew to gargantuan proportions. The search for Landor came closer steadily. Kieron could hear the soldiers tramping the stone corridors and causeways of the Citadel.

Suddenly there was a knock at the barred door to the Valkyrs' quarters.

"Open! In the name of the lord of Kalgan!"

A Valkyr near the door replied languidly. "Our master sleeps. Go away."

The knocking continued. "It is regretted that we must disturb him, but a slave of the household has escaped. We must search for him."

"Would you disturb the Warlord of Valkyr's repose for a slave, barbarian?" demanded the warrior at the door in a hurt tone of voice. "Go away."

The officer in the hallway was beginning to lose patience.

"Open, I say! Or we'll break in!"

"Do," offered the Valkyr pleasantly. "I have a sword that has been too long dry."

How Landor must be sweating in that back room, Kieron thought wryly, thinking that the Valkyrs would rather kill him than let his message reach Freka. But Landor's death would serve no useful purpose now. Time! Time was needed. Time enough to let Nevitta get Alys out of danger!

Kieron stepped to the door, hoping that some warriors of the Outer Marches might

possibly be within earshot and catch the implication of his words. "Kieron of Valkyr speaks!" he cried. "We have Landor of Earth here! Landor, the First Lord—is that the slave you seek?"

But the only response was the sudden crash of a ram against the panels of the wooden door. Kieron prepared to fight. Still, no sound of a spaceship rising . . .

The door collapsed, and a flood of Kalgan warriors poured into the room, weapons flashing.

Savagely, the Valkyrs closed with them, and the air rang with the metallic clash of steel. No mercy was asked and none was given. Kieron cut a circle of death with his long, outworld weapon, the fighting blood of a hundred generations of warriors singing in his ears. The savage chant of the Edge rose above the confused sounds of battle. A man screamed in agony as his arm was severed by a blow from a Valkyr blade, and he waved the stump desperately, spattering the milling men with dark blood. A Valkyr warrior went down, locked in a death-embrace with a Kalgan warrior, driving his dagger into his enemy again and again even as he died. Kieron crossed swords with a guardsman, forcing him backward until the Kalgan slipped on the flagstones made slippery with blood and went down with a sword-cut from throat to groin.

The Valkyrs were cutting down their opponents, but numbers were beginning to tell. Two Valkyrs went down before fresh onslaughts. Another, and another, and still another. Kieron felt the burning touch of a dagger wound. He looked down and saw that a thrust from someone in the *mêlée* had slashed him to the bone. His side was slick with blood and the white ribs showed along the ten inch gash.

Now, Kieron stood back to back with his two remaining companions. The other Valkyrs were down, lying still on the bloody floor. Kieron caught a glimpse of Freka's tall figure behind his guardsman and he lunged for him, suddenly blind with fury. Two Kalgan guards engaged him and he lost sight of Freka. A Valkyr went down with a thrust in the belly. Kieron took another wound in the arm. He could not tell how badly hurt he was, but faintness from the loss of blood was telling on him. It was getting hard to see clearly.

Darkness seemed to be flickering like a black flame just beyond his range of vision. He saw Freka again and tried to reach him. Again he failed, blocked by a Kalgan soldier. A thrown sword whistled past him and imbedded itself in the last Valkyr's chest. The man sank to the floor in silence, and Kieron fought alone.

He saw the blade of an officer descending, but he could not ward it off. And as it fell, a great hissing roar sounded beyond the open window. Kieron almost smiled. Alys was safe . . .

He lifted his sword to parry the descending stroke. Weakened, the best he could do was deflect it slightly. The blade caught him a glancing blow on the side of the head and he staggered to his knees. He tried to raise his weapon again . . . tried to fight on . . . but he could not. Slowly, reluctantly, he sank to the floor as darkness welled up out of the bloody flagstones to engulf him . . .

V

KIERON STIRRED, THE PULSING ache in his side piercing the reddish veil of unconsciousness. Under him, he could feel wet stones that stank of death and filth. He moved painfully, and the throbbing agony grew worse, making him teeter precariously between consciousness and the dark.

He was stiff and cold. Hurt badly, too, he thought vaguely. His wounds had not been tended. Very carefully, he opened his eyes. They told him what he had already known. He was in a dark cell, filthy and damp. A sick chill shook him. Teeth chattering, huddled on the stone floor, Kieron sank again into unconsciousness.

When he awoke again, he was burning with fever and a cold bowl of solidified, greasy gruel lay beside him. His tongue felt thick and swollen, but the sharp agony of his wounded side had subsided to a dull hurt. With a great effort, he dragged himself into a corner of the dungeon and propped himself up facing the iron-bound door.

His searching hands found that he had been stripped of his harness and weapons. He was naked, smeared with filth and dried blood. As he moved he felt a renewed flow of warmth flooding down from his torn

flank. The wound had reopened. Sweat was streaking the caked blood on his cheek. His mind wandered in a feverish delirium—a nightmare dream in which the tall, coldly arrogant figure of Freka seemed to fill all space and all time. Kieron's over-bright eyes glittered with animal hate . . .

Somehow, he felt that the hated Kalgan was nearby. He tried to keep his eyes open, but the lids seemed weighted. His head sagged and the fever took him again into the ebony darkness of some fantastic intergalactic night where weird shapes danced and whirled in hideous joyousness . . .

The rattling of the door-lock woke him. It might have been minutes later or days. Kieron had no way of knowing. He felt light-headed and giddy. He watched the door open with fever-bright eyes. A jailer carrying a flambeau entered and the light blinded Kieron. He shielded his face with his hand. There was a voice speaking to him. A voice he knew . . . and hated. With a shuddering effort, he took a grip on his staggering mind, his hate sustaining him now. Moving his hands away from his face, he looked up—into the icy eyes of Freka the Unknown.

"So you're awake at last," the Kalgan said.

Kieron made no reply. He could feel the fury burning deep inside him.

Freka held a jewelled dagger in his hands, toying with it idly. Kieron watched the shards of light leaping from the faceted gems in the liquid torchlight. The slender blade shimmered, blue and silvery in the Kalgan's hands.

"I have been told that the Lady Alys was with you—here on Kalgan. Is this true?"

Alys . . . Kieron thought vaguely of her for a moment, but somehow the picture brought sadness. He put her out of his mind and squinted up at Freka's gemmed dagger, unable to take his eyes from the glittering weapon.

"Can you speak?" demanded Freka. "Was Toran's sister with you?"

Kieron watched the weapon, a feral brilliance growing like a flame in his dark eyes.

Freka shrugged. "Very well, Kieron. It makes no difference. Does it interest

you to know that the armies are gathering? Earth will be ours within four weeks." His voice was cold, unemotional. "You realize, of course, that you cannot be allowed to live."

Kieron said nothing. Very carefully he gathered his strength. The dagger . . . the dagger . . . !

"I will not risk war with Valkyr by killing you now. But you will be tried by a council of star-kings on Earth when we have done what we must do . . ."

Kieron stared hard at the slender weapon, his hate pounding in his fevered mind. He drew a deep, shuddering breath. Freka spun the blade idly, setting the jewels afire.

"We should have taken you the moment Landor was missed," mused the Kalgan. "But . . . it really doesn't matter now . . ."

Kieron's taut muscles uncoiled in a snakelike, lashing movement. He hit Freka below the knees with all his fevered strength and the Kalgan went down without a sound, the slim dagger clattering on the slimy floor of the cell. The guard leaped forward. Kieron's searching hand closed about the hilt of the dagger. With a sound of pure animal rage in his throat he drove it into Freka's unprotected chest. Twice again his hand rose and fell, and then the guard caught him full in the face with a booted foot and the light of the torch faded again into inky blackness . . .

IN THE DARKNESS, time lost its meaning. Kieron woke a dozen times, feeling the dull throbbing ache of his wounds and then fading again into unconsciousness. He ate—or was fed—enough to keep him alive, but he had no memory of it. He floated in a red-tinged sea of black, unreal, frightening. He screamed or sobbed as the phantasms of his sick dreams dictated, but through it all ran a single thread of elation. Freka, the hated one, was dead. No horror of nightmare or delirium could strip him of that one grip on life. Freka was dead. He remembered vaguely the feel of the dagger plunging again and again into his tormentor's breast. Sometimes he even forgot why he had hated Freka, but he clung to the knowledge that he had killed him the way a drown-

ing man clings to the last suffocating breath.

Sounds filtered into Kieron's dungeon. Sounds that were familiar. The hissing roar of spaceships. Then later the awful susurration of mob sounds. Kieron lay sprawled on the stones of his cell-floor, not hearing, lost in the fantasmagoric stupor of delirium. His wounds still untended, only the magnificent body of a warrior helped him cling to the thread of life.

Other sounds came. The crash of rams and the clatter of falling masonry. The shrieks of men and women dying. The ringing cacophony of weapons and the curses of fighting men. Hours passed and the din grew louder, closer, in the heart of the Citadel of Neg itself. The torches on the outer cellblocks guttered out and were left untended. The sounds of fighting rose to a wild pitch, interlaced with the inhuman, animal sounds of a mob gone mad.

At last Kieron stirred, some of the familiar sounds of battle striking buried chords in his fevered mind. He listened to the advancing clash of weapons until it rang just beyond his dungeon door.

He dragged himself into his corner again and crouched there, the feral light in his eyes brilliant now. His hands itched for killing. He flexed the fingers painfully and waited.

The silence was sudden and as complete as the hush of the tomb.

Kieron waited.

The door was flung wide, and men bearing torches rushed into the cell. Kieron lunged savagely for the first one, hands seeking a throat.

"Kieron!" Nevitta threw himself backward violently. Kieron clung to him, his face a fevered mask of hate. "Kieron! It is I . . . Nevitta!"

Kieron's hands fell away from the old warrior and he stood swaying, squinting against the light of the torches. "Nevitta . . . Nevitta?"

A wild laugh came from the prisoner's cracked lips. He looked about him, into the strained faces of his own fighting men.

He took one step and pitched forward into the arms of Nevitta, who carried him like a child up into the light, tears streaking his grizzled cheeks . . .

FOR THREE WEEKS Alys and Nevitta nursed Kieron, sucking the poison of his untended wounds with their mouths and bathing him to break the fiery grip of the fever. At last they won. Kieron opened his eyes—and they were sane and clear.

"How long?" Kieron asked faintly.

"We were gone from Kalgan twenty days . . . you have lain here twenty-one," Alys said thankfully.

"Why did you come back here?" Kieron demanded bitterly. "You have lost an Empire!"

"We came for you, Kieron," Nevitta said. "For our king."

"But . . . Alys . . ." Kieron protested.

"I would not have the Great Throne, Kieron," said Alys, "if it meant leaving you to rot in a cell!"

Kieron turned his face to the wall. Because of him, the star-kings fought Ivane's battle. And by now they would have won. The only thing that had been done was the killing of the treacherous Freka. He held Kalgan now, for the Valkyrs had returned seeking their Warlord after Freka's plan had stripped the planet of fighting men—and the mobs had done the Valkyr's work for them. But two worlds were not an Empire of stars. Alys had been cheated. Because of him.

No! thought Kieron, by the Seven Hells; no! They could not be defeated so easily. There were five thousand warriors with him now. If need be, he would fight the Imperium's massed forces to win Alys' rightful place on the throne of Gilmer of Kaidor!

"Let me up," Kieron demanded. "If we hit them on Earth before they have a chance to consolidate, there's still a chance!"

"There is no hurry, Kieron," said Nevitta holding him in the bed with a great hand. "Freka and the star-kings have already . . ."

"Freka!" Kieron sat bolt upright.

"Why, yes . . ." murmured Nevitta in perplexity. "Freka."

"That's impossible!"

"We have had information from the Imperial City, Kieron. Freka is there," said Alys.

Kieron sank back on the pillows. Had he dreamed killing the Kalgan? No! It wasn't

possible! He had driven the blade into his chest three times . . . driven it deep.

With an effort he rose from the bed.

"Order my charger, Nevitta!"

"But sir!"

"Quickly, Nevitta! There is no time!"

Nevitta saluted reluctantly and withdrew.

"Help me with my harness, Alys," ordered Kieron forgetful of majesty.

"Kieron, you can't ride!"

"I have to ride, Alys. Listen to me. I drove a dagger into Freka three times . . . and he has not died! One man can tell us why, and we must know. *That man is Geller of the Marshes!*"

NEG WAS A SHAMBLES. The advent of the Valkyrs had been a signal for the brutish population to go mad. Mobs had thronged the streets, smashing, killing and looting. The few Kalgan warriors left behind to guard the city had had to aid the Valkyrs in restoring order. It seemed to Kieron, as he rode along the now sullenly silent streets, that Kalgan and Neg had been deliberately abandoned as having served a purpose. If Freka still lived, as they said, then he was something unique among men, and not meant for so unimportant a world as Kalgan.

Shops and houses had been gutted by fire. Goods of all kinds were strewn about the streets, and here and there a body—twisted and dismembered—awaited the harrassed burial detachments that roamed the shattered megalopolis.

Kieron and Alys rode slowly toward the marshy slums of the lower city, Nevitta following them at a short distance. The three war horses, creatures bred to war and destruction, paced along easily, flaring nostrils taking in the familiar smells of a ruined city.

Along the street of the Black Flames there was nothing left standing whole. Every hovel, every tenement had been gutted and looted by the mobs. Presently, Kieron drew rein before a shuttered shanty between two structures of fire-blackened stone.

Nevitta rode up with a protest. "Why do you seek this beloved of demons, Kieron?" he asked fearfully. "No good can come of this!"

Kieron stared at the shanty. It stared

back at him with veiled ghoulis eyes. The writhing mists shrouded the grey street in the eternal twilight of Kalgan. Kieron felt his hands trembling on the reins. This was the lair of the warlock.

The stench of the marshes was thick and now the mists turned to soft rain. Kieron dismounted.

"Wait for me here," he ordered Nevitta and Alys.

With pounding heart, he drew his sword and started for the door that gaped like the black mouth of a plague victim. Alys touched his elbow, disregarding his instructions. Her eyes were bright with fear, but she followed him closely. Secretly glad of her companionship, Kieron breathed a prayer to his Valkyr gods and stepped inside . . .

The place was a wreck. Old books lay everywhere, ripped and tattered. In a corner, someone had tried to make a bonfire of a pile of manuscripts and broken furniture and had half succeeded.

"The mob has been here," Alys said succinctly.

Kieron led the way through the rubble toward the door of a back room. Carefully, he pushed it ajar with the point of his blade. It creaked menacingly, revealing another chamber—one filled with strange machines and twisted tubes of glass. Great black boxes stood along one wall, coils of bright wire running into the jumbled mass of shattered machines that dominated the center of the room. The air of the cold, silent room had a strange and unpleasant tang. The smell, thought the Valkyr, of the Great Destroyer!

The tip of his sword touched one of the bright copper coils springing from the row of black boxes along the wall, and a tiny blue spark leaped up the blade. Kieron yanked his weapon away, his heart racing wildly. A thin curl of smoke hung in the air, and the steel of the blade was pitted. Kieron fought down the urge to run in terror.

"I'm afraid, Kieron!" whispered Alys, clinging to him.

Kieron took her hand and moved cautiously around the pile of broken machinery. He found Geller then, and tried to stop Alys from seeing.

"The Great Destroyer he served failed him," Kieron said slowly.

The warlock was dead. The mob, terrified—and hating what they could not understand—had killed him cruelly. The staring eyes mocked Kieron, the blackened tongue lolled stupidly out of the dry lips. Geller's mystery, thought Kieron, was still safe with him. . . .

On the way out, Kieron stopped and picked up the remnants of a book of sigils. It was incredibly old, for the characters on the cover were those of the legendary First Empire. With some difficulty he made out the title.

"Perpetually Regenerating Warps and their Application in Interstellar Engines". . .

The words meant nothing to him. He dropped the magic book and picked up two others. This time his eyes widened.

"What is it, Kieron?" Alys asked fearfully.

"Long ago," Kieron said thoughtfully, "on Valkyr, it was said that the ancients of the First Empire were familiar with the secrets of the Great Destroyer . . ."

"That's true. That is why the Interregnum came, and the dark ages," said Alys.

"I wonder," mused Kieron looking at the books. "What was this Geller known best for?"

Alys shuddered. "For his homunculi."

"The ancients, it is said, knew many things. Even how to make . . . artificial servants. Robots, they were called." He handed her the book. "Can you read this ancient script?"

Alys read aloud, her voice unsteady.

"First Principles of Robotics."

"And this one?"

"Incubation and Gestation of Androids". . . !"

Kieron of Valkyr stood in the silent, wrecked laboratory of the dead warlock Geller, his medieval mind trying to break free of the bondage of a millennium of superstition and ignorance. He understood now . . . many things.

VI

LIKE GREAT SILVER FISH leaping up into the bowl of night, the ships of the Valkyr fleet rose from Kalgan. Within the pulsing hulls five thousand warriors rode, ready for battle.

Against the mighty forces of the assembled star-kings, the army of Valkyr counted for almost nothing; but the savage fighting men of the Edge carried with them their talisman—Alys Imperatrix, uncrowned sovereign of the Galaxy, Heiress to the Thousand Emperors—the daughter of their beloved warrior-prince, Gilmer, conqueror of Kaidor.

In the lead vessel, Nevitta dogged the harried Navigators, urging greater speed. Below decks, the war chargers snorted and stomped the steel decks, sensing the tension of the coming clash in the close, smoky air of the spaceships.

Kieron stood beside the forward port with Alys, looking out into the strangely distorted night of space. As speed increased, the stars vanished and the night that pressed against the flanks of the hurtling ship grew grey and unsteady. Still velocity climbed, and then beyond the great curving glass screen there was nothing. Not blackness, or emptiness. A soul-chilling nothingness that twisted the mind and refused to be accepted by human eyes. Hyperspace.

Kieron drew the draperies closed and the observation lounge of the huge ancient liner grew dim and warm.

"What's ahead, Kieron?" the girl asked with a sigh. "More fighting and killing?"

The Valkyr shook his head. "Your Imperium, Your Majesty," he said formally, "a crown of stars that a thousand generations have gathered for you. That lies ahead."

"Oh, Kieron! Can't you forget the Empire for the space of an hour?" Alys demanded angrily.

The Warlord of Valkyr looked at his Empress in perplexity. There were times when women were hard to fathom.

"Forget it, I say!" the girl cried, her eyes suddenly flaming.

"If Your Majesty wishes, I'll not speak of it again," said Kieron stiffly.

Alys took a step toward him. "There was a time when you looked at me as a woman. When you *thought* of me as a woman! Am I so different now?"

Kieron studied her slim body and sensuously patrician face. "There was a time when I thought of you as a child, too. Those times pass. You are now my Empress. I am your vassal. Command me.

I'll fight for you. Die for you, if need be. Anything. But by the Seven Hells, Alys, don't torture me with favors I can't claim!"

"So I must command, then?" She stamped her foot angrily. "Very well, I command you, Valkyr!"

"Lady, I'll never be a Consort!"

The girl's face flushed. "Did I ask it? I know I can't make a lapdog out of you, Kieron."

"Stop it, Alys," Kieron muttered heavily.

"Kieron," she said softly, "I've loved you since I was a child. I love you now. Does that mean nothing to you?"

"Everything, Alys."

"Then for the space of this voyage, Kieron, forget the Empire. Forget everything except that I love you. Take what I offer you. There is no Empress here..."

THE SILVER FLEET speared down into the atmosphere of the mother planet. Earth lay beneath them like a globe of azure. The spaceships fanned out into a wedge as they split the thin cold air high above the sprawling megalopolis of the Imperial City.

The capital lay ringed about with the somnolent shapes of the star-kings' great armada. Somewhere down there, Kieron knew, Freka waited. Freka the Unknown. The unkillable? Kieron wondered. For weapons he had his sword and a little knowledge. He prayed it would be enough. It had to be. Five thousand warriors could not defeat the assembled might of the star-kings.

Shunning the spaceport, Kieron led his fleet to a landing on the grassy esplanade that surrounded the city. As the hurried debarkation of men and horses began, Kieron could see a cavalry force massing before the gates to oppose them. He cursed and urged his men to greater speed. Horses reared and neighed; weapons glinted in the late afternoon sunlight.

Within the hour the debarkation was complete, and Kieron sat armed and mounted before the serried ranks of his warriors. The afternoon was filled with the flash of steel and the blazing glory of gonfalons as he ordered his ranks for battle . . . a battle that he hoped with all his heart to avoid.

Across the plain, the Valkyr could make

out the pennon of Doorn in the first rank of the advancing defenders. Kieron ordered Nevitta to stay by the Empress in the rear ranks and to escort her forward with all ceremony if he called for her.

Alys rode a white charger and had clad herself in the panoply of a Valkyr warrior maid. Her hips were girded in a harness of linked steel plates, her long legs free to ride astride. Over her chest and breasts was laced a hauberk of chain mail that shimmered in the slanting sunlight. On her head a Valkyr's winged helmet—and from under it her golden hair fell in cascades of light to her shoulders. A silver cloak stood out behind her as she galloped past the ranks of Valkyrs, and they cheered her as she went. Kieron, watching her, thought she resembled the ancient war-goddess of his own world—imperious, regal.

With a cry, Kieron ordered his riders forward and the glittering ranks swept forward across the esplanade like a turbulent wave, spear-heads agleam, gonafalons fluttering. He rode far ahead, seeking a meeting with old Eric of Doorn, his father's friend.

He signalled, and the two surging masses of warriors slowed as the two star-kings rode to a meeting between the armies. Kieron raised an open right hand in the sign of truce and old Eric did likewise. Their caparisoned chargers tossed their heads angrily at being restrained and eyed each other with white-rimmed eyes.

Kieron drew rein, facing the old star-king.

"I greet you," he said formally.

"Do you come in friendship, or in war?" asked Eric.

"That will depend on the Empress," Kieron replied.

The lord of Doorn smiled, and there was scorn on his face. He was remembering Kalgan and Kieron's reluctance. "You will be pleased to know, then, that the Imperial Ivane bids you enter her city in peace—so that you may do her homage and throw yourself on her mercy for your crimes against Kalgan."

Kieron gave a short, steely laugh. So Ivane had already learned of the Valkyr sack of Kalgan. "I do not know any 'Imperial Ivane,' Eric," he said coldly. "When I spoke of the Empress, I meant

the true Empress, Alys, the daughter of your lord and mine, Gilmer of Kaidor." He signalled Alys and Nevitta forward.

The gonfalons of the Valkyr line dipped in salute as Alys trotted through the ranks. She drew rein, facing the amazed Eric.

"Noble lady!" he gasped. "We were told you were dead!"

"And so I might have been, had Ivane had her way!"

The old star-king stammered in confusion. There was more here than he could understand. Only a week before, he and the other star-kings had done homage to Ivane and hailed her as their savior from the oppressions of the Emperor Toran, and the nearest living kin to the late Gilmer. And now . . . !

Eric frowned. "If we have been made fools, Freka must answer for this!"

"And now," asked Kieron grimly, "do we enter the city in peace or do we cut our way in?"

Eric signalled his men to swing in beside the ranked Valkyrs and the whole mass of armed men moved through the fading afternoon toward the gates of the Imperial City.

IT WAS DUSK by the time the cavalcade reached the walls of the Imperial Palace. Kieron called a halt and ordered his men to rest on their arms. Taking only Nevitta and Alys with him, he joined Eric of Doorn in challenging the Janizaries of the Palace Guard.

They were passed by the stolid Pleiadenes without comment, for the lord of Doorn was known as a vassal of the Imperial Ivane. Faces set, the small party strode up the wide curving stairway that led into the Hall of the Great Throne. The courtiers had been warned by the shouts of the people in the streets that something was happening, and they had already begun to gather in the Throne Room.

He had come a long way, thought Kieron, from the day when he had stood before the Throne begging an audience with Toran. Now, everything hung on his one chance to prove his case—and Alys'—to the assembled nobles.

Kieron noted with some concern that the Palace Guards were gathering too. They covered each exit to the chamber, cutting off retreat,

By now, the Hall of the Great Throne was jammed with courtiers and star-kings, all tensely silent—waiting. Nor did they wait long.

With a blast of trumpets and a rolling of tympani, Ivane entered the Throne Room. Some of the courtiers knelt, but others stood in confusion, looking from Alys to Ivane and back again.

Kieron studied Ivane coldly. She was, he had to admit, a regal figure. A tall woman with hair the color of jet. A face that seemed chiseled out of marble. Dark, predatory eyes and a figure like a Dawn Age goddess. She stood before the Great Throne of the Empire, mantled in the sable robe of the Imperium—a robe as black as space and spangled with diamonds to resemble the stars of the Imperial Galaxy. On her head rested the irridium tiara of Imperatrix.

Ivane swept the Hall with a haughty stare that stung like a lash. When her eyes found Alys standing beside Kieron, they brightened, became feral.

"Guards!" she commanded. "Seize that woman! She is the killer of the Emperor Toran!"

A murmuring filled the chamber. The Janizaries pressed forward. Kieron drew his sword and leaped to the dais beside Ivane. She did not shrink back from him.

"Touch her, and Ivane dies!" shouted Kieron, his point at Ivane's naked breast. The murmuring subsided and the Janizaries pulled up short.

"Now, you are all going to listen to me!" shouted Kieron from the dais. "This woman under my blade is a murderess and plotter, and I can prove it!"

Ivane's face was strained and white. Not from fear of his sword, Kieron knew.

"In the Palace dungeons you will likely find Lander . . ." Kieron continued. "He will be there because he knew of Ivane's plottings and talked too much when he had a dagger at his throat. He will confirm what I say!"

"This woman plotted to usurp the Imperium as long as five years ago! It may have been longer . . ." He turned to Ivane. "How long does it take to incubate an *android*, Ivane? A year? Two? And then to train him, school him so that every move he makes is intended to further your aims? How long does all that take?"

Ivane uttered a scream of terror now. "Freka! Call Freka!"

Kieron dropped his sword point and stepped away from Ivane as though she were contaminated. There was little danger from *her* now—but there was still another.

Freka appeared at the edge of the dais, his tall form towering above the courtiers. "You called for me, Imperial Ivane?"

Ivane stared at Kieron with hate-filled eyes. "You have failed me! *Kill him now!*"

KIERON WHIRLED and caught Freka's blade on his own. The courtiers drew back, giving them room to fight. No one made a move to interfere. It was known that Valkyrs had sacked the city of Neg, and according to the warrior code the two warlords must be allowed to fight to the death if they wished.

Kieron made no attack. Instead he retreated before the expressionless Freka.

"Did you know, Freka," asked Kieron softly, "that Geller of the Marshes is dead? He was your father in a way, wasn't he?"

Freka made no reply, and for a moment the only sound in the hushed chamber was the ring of blades.

Suddenly Kieron lunged. His sword pierced Freka from breast to back. The Valkyr stepped back and pulled his blade clear. The crowd gasped, for Freka the Unknown did not fall . . .

"Are you really unkillable?" breathed Kieron. "I wonder!"

Again he lunged under the mechanical guard of the Kalkan. Again his blade sank deep. Freka backed away for a moment, still alert and unwounded.

Kieron shouted derisively at the star-kings: "Great warriors! Do you see? You have followed the leadership of an android! A homunculus spawned by the warlock Geller!"

A gasping roar went up in the chamber. A sound of superstitious horror and growing anger.

Kieron parried a thrust and brought his blade down on Freka's sword arm. Hard. A sword clattered to the flagstones—still gripped by a slowly relaxing hand. There was no blood. The android still moved in, eyes expressionless, his one hand reaching for his enemy. Kieron struck again. A

clean cut opened from shoulder to belly, slicing the artificial tendons and leaving the android helpless but still erect. Kieron raised and lowered his blade in glittering arcs. Freka . . . or the thing that had been Freka . . . collapsed in a grotesque heap. Still it moved. Kieron passed his point again and again through the quivering mass until at long last it was still. Somewhere a woman fainted.

A thick silence fell over the assemblage. All eyes turned to Ivane. She stood staring at the remnants of the thing that had been . . . almost . . . a man. Her hand fluttered at her throat.

Alys' voice cut through the heavy stillness. "Arrest that woman for the murder of my brother Toran!"

But the crowd of courtiers was thinking of other things. Jaded and cynical, they had seen with their own eyes that Ivane was a familiar of the dreaded Great Destroyer. Someone cried: "Witch! Burn her!"

The mass of courtiers and warriors swept forward, screaming for the kill. Kieron leaped for the dais, his sword still bared.

"I'll kill the first one who sets foot on the Great Throne!" he cried.

But Ivane had heard the crowd sounds. The black mantle slipped from her shoulders, and she stood stripped to the waist, like a marble goddess—her eyes recapturing some of their icy hauteur. Then, before she could be stopped, she had taken a jewelled dagger and driven it deep into her breast.

Kieron caught her as she fell, feeling the warm blood staining his hands. He eased her down on the foot of the Great

Throne and laid his ear to her breast.

There was no pulse. Ivane was dead.

BEFORE the assembled Court, the Warlord of Valkyr knelt before his Empress. The star-kings had gone, and the Valkyrs were the last outworld warriors remaining in the Imperial City. Now, they too, would take their leave.

The Empress sat on the Great Throne, mantled in sable. Somehow, the huge throne and the vast vaulted chamber seemed to make her look small and frail.

"Your Imperial Majesty," said Kieron, "have we your leave to go?"

Alys' eyes were bright with tears. She leaned forward so that none but Kieron might hear. "Stay a while yet, Kieron. At least let us say our goodbyes alone and not . . ." She looked about the crowded Throne Room, ". . . not here."

Kieron shook his head mutely. Aloud, he said again, "Have I Your Majesty's permission to return to Valkyr?"

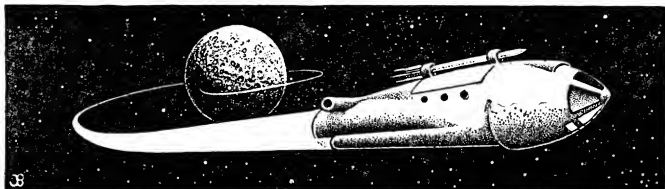
"Kieron . . .!" whispered Alys. "Please . . ."

He looked up at her once, pain in his eyes, but he did not speak.

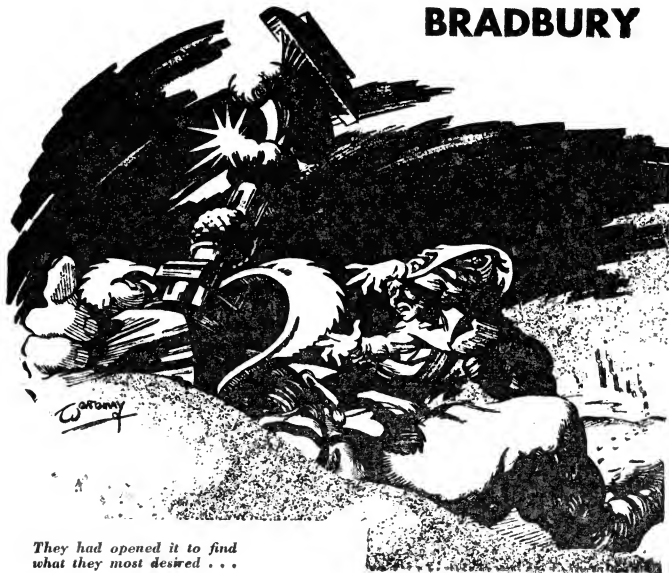
Alys knew then that the gulf had opened between them again; that this time, it was for the rest of their lives. The tears came and streaked her cheek as she lifted her head and spoke for all the Court to hear.

"Permission is granted, My Lord of Valkyr. You . . . you may return to Valkyr." And then she whispered, "And my love goes with you, Kieron!"

Kieron raised her jewelled hands to his lips and kissed them. . . . Then he arose and turned on his heel to stride swiftly from the Great Hall.



A Short Story by
RAY
BRADBURY



*They had opened it to find
what they most desired . . .*

death-wish

**They wandered the dead and fragile cities, looking for the
legendary Blue Bottle—not knowing what it was, nor caring,
not really wanting to find it . . . ever . . .**

THE SUNDIALS WERE TUMBLED into white pebbles. The birds of the air now flew in ancient skies of rock and sand, buried, their songs stopped. The rivers were currented with dust which flooded across the land when the wind bade it reenact an old tale of engulfment. The cities were deep laid with

granaries of silence, time stored and kept, golden kernels of forgetfulness, pools and fountains of quietude and memory.

Mars was dead.

And then out of the large stillness, from a great distance, on the stones of an old highway, there was a tiny sound. First, like an insect, and growing larger,

between the cinnamon hills, and finally broadening, flattening out, the sound buzzing and humming, while something moved, growing big.

The highway trembled. The rocks ground one upon another briefly. The sound grew into a thunder which shook down avalanches of dust in the old cities.

The sound ceased.

Mr. Albert Steinbeck and Mr. Leonard Craig sat in their rusted automobile, in the warm silence of midday, sighing. They looked at a city which did not move but stood with one stone upon another waiting for them to enter.

"Hello!" cried Mr. Steinbeck.

A tower dropped into soft dusting ruin.

"Hello!"

A second and a third tower crumbled into whispers of dust.

"Hello!"

Steinbeck waited.

No more towers fell.

"It's safe to go in now," he said.

"To find the Blue Bottle?" said Mr. Leonard Craig, not moving.

"Yes."

"Why does everyone want it? What's in the Bottle?"

"I don't know." Steinbeck checked his equipment.

"Who does know?"

"Nobody knows. Those that found it never told."

"Then why bother?" said Craig, lying in his corner of the car, a cigarette unlit on his lower lip. His mouth barely moved. His eyes were half shut and faintly amused.

"Use a little sense," said Steinbeck. "It's because it might contain *anything* that everyone is looking for the Blue Bottle."

"Everyone?"

Steinbeck nodded. "It's old. Old as that desert there, or the canals."

"A Blue Bottle," said Craig, sitting up and looking around, as if trying to explain it to himself and the highway. "Blown by some ancient Martians, and it's in one of these damned cities. Mind you, I'm not criticising. I've got nothing to do. If I wasn't traveling with you, I'd be sitting under a tree somewhere or swimming in a canal. I'm just along for the ride. Continue."

STEINBECK LOOKED at the rusted car. They had found it in an old ruin somewhere, part of the flotsam of the first Industrial Invasion of Mars that had died when resources had petered out forty years ago. He and Craig had worked on the motor for six weeks and it ran, intermittently, from dead city to city, through the lands of the idlers and roustabouts, the dreamers and the lazars, like himself and Craig, men who had never wanted to do anything and had found Mars a good place to do it.

"Look at it this way, Craig," said Steinbeck; "all of my life, I've done nothing. Nothing big. Everyone else I went to school with, they did something big, on Earth, on Venus, somewhere in the System. Now it's my turn."

"You're a tramp," said Craig truthfully.

"Not when I get that Blue Bottle."

"Let me figure." Craig counted his fingers. "Nine, no, ten years you've hunted that damn thing. Long before I met you. And now the last two years since I landed on this place, I've been tagging along, watching you twitch nights. I see you by the fire, asleep. You whine and shake. You get nightmares. You sure must want it bad, and since you don't even know what's in that damn Bottle, that means you don't even know what you want from life."

"Look, Craig, we argue about this every day."

"And every day I keep telling you to relax. You don't need an excuse to be a bum. You got this Blue Bottle as an excuse maybe, a rationalization, for you never doing anything. All I ask is a drink, some hot soup, a sandwich, plenty of sleep. No work, if I can help it. And I don't need a blasted Bottle to excuse my lazy carcass. All right, I'll shut up. Come on, we'll get into the city."

They walked on the stones of the avenue, past fountains of littered bone.

"This building?" asked Craig.

"Just a moment," said Steinbeck. He cupped his mouth and shouted, "You there!"

They ran back.

From the towers, in a shattering flight, stone griffens fell down. They banged the street. They flew to pieces. His voice sum-

moned them like live animals, and the towers answered, groaned, cracked, the gargyle's tilted over, twisting, plummeting. They fell one upon another, their faces splintered, their teeth stinging in small flints on Steinbeck's chest. That was the way of these cities. Sometimes towers as beautiful as a symphony would fall at a cough. It was like watching a Bach cantata disintegrate before your eyes. A moment later there was only a sweltering heap and silence.

"If the Blue Bottle was in there," said Craig, "we'll never know."

"Shut up."

They tested another building and entered.

"You take that room. I'll take this," said Steinbeck.

"In that bottle," said Craig, "is it a woman in there, a little accordian woman, all compressed up, like one of those tin cups you fold in on itself? or like one of those Japanese flowers you put in cold water and it opens out?"

"I don't give a damn for women."

"That's what you think. Maybe that's it. You never had a woman, so maybe, subliminally, that's what you hope is in it?" Craig pursed his mouth. "Or maybe, in that bottle, something about your childhood. That's a thought. All put up in a bundle, a lake, a telephone pole or a tree you climbed, a root-beer you drank, a sliver you got in your hand, green grass, a creek, some crayfish, how's that sound?"

Steinbeck's eyes focussed on a distant point. "Yes. Sometimes, that's almost it. I don't know."

"What's in the bottle would depend, maybe, on who's looking. Old men would want a Youth Elixir in it. A scientist might want a perpetual motion machine in it. Biologists would expect to find the perfect edible all-purpose food to sustain life in any climate. What about you?"

"Some nights," said Steinbeck, "I almost know. I dream about it. All I know is I've got to find it."

"Now, if there was a shot of bourbon in it—"

"Get on, and look!"

ing there were casks, scuttles, cribs, crocks, magnums, pails, stoups, tubs, urns, vases and cruets. These were fashioned of red, pink, yellow, violet and black glass.

Steinbeck broke them, one by one, to eliminate them, to get them out of the way, so he would never have to go through them again, searching for the hidden treasure. The empty house sounded with continually breaking glass.

Steinbeck finished his room. He stood ready to invade the next. He was afraid to go on. Afraid that *this* time he would find it, the search would be over and meaning would go out of his life. It had been with him a long time, this fear that some day he *would* find the Bottle. And what would be left of his life *then*? Only after he had heard of the Bottle of Blue Glass from fire-travelers all the way from Venus to Jupiter, ten years ago, had life begun to take on a purpose. The fever had lit him and he had burned steadily ever since. If he worked it properly, the prospect of finding the Bottle might fill his entire life to the brim. Another thirty years, if he was careful, and not *too* diligent, of searching, never admitting aloud that it wasn't the Bottle that counted at all, but the search, the running and the hunting, the dust and the cities and the going-on. Then he could die, his life full of activity, as senseless as a clock set to sound out its twelve strokes at some future date, and then lie still.

What if he knew the Bottle to lie in the next room at this instant?

He would turn and walk out and not come back for many years. He knew that as certainly as he knew the forests of grey web and thickets of spiders waiting in the long hall.

He heard a sound. He turned and walked to a window looking out into the courtyard. A small grey, streamlined motorcycle had purred up almost noiselessly, at the end of the street. A fat man with blond hair eased himself off the spring seat and stood looking at the towers. Another searcher. A rich one, *this* time. Steinbeck sighed. Thousands of them, searching and searching. But there were thousands of brittle cities and towns and villages and it would take a millenium to search them all.

"How you doing?" Craig appeared in a

THERE WERE seven rooms on the ground floor. They were filled with glitter and shine. From floor to tiered ceil-

doorway.

"Get back to your own room and search."

"I searched. Nothing."

Steinbeck sniffed. "Do you smell anything?"

"What?" Craig looked about.

"Smells like—bourbon," said Steinbeck.

"Ho!" Craig laughed. "That's *me*!"

"You?"

"I just took a drink. Found some in the other room."

Steinbeck moved aside some red bottles and peered into a corner.

"Sure," said Craig. "I shoved some stuff around and I found a mess of bottles, like always, and one of them had some bourbon in it, so I drank it."

Steinbeck turned and stared.

"Say that again."

"So I drank it," said Craig.

"What would bourbon be doing in a Martian bottle?" asked Steinbeck. His hands were cold. He didn't move, but he knew that he was trembling. He took a slow step. "What color was the bottle?"

"I didn't notice, it was just a bottle—" Craig swallowed and turned pale. "Oh God!" he said. He put his hand to his throat and then to his mouth. "It was blue." And Craig was running.

STEINBECK WANTED to yell, "No, don't! I'm leaving." He tried to walk out, to get away. But Craig was back now, and there was a bottle, as blue as the sky, the size of a small fruit, light and airy in his hands as he set it down upon a table.

"Here it is, it doesn't look very interesting to me," said Craig. "It can't be the right one. After all, it's just a bottle, a bottle with some bourbon in it, and very refreshing." He smiled.

Steinbeck stood looking at it.

"I don't see anything inside," he said.

"You're insane," said Craig. "Go on, shake it."

Steinbeck picked it up, gingerly. He shook it.

"Hear the liquor gurgle inside?" said Craig.

"No."

"I can hear it. Just as plain."

"There's nothing in it, I tell you."

"You don't see *anything*?"

"No."

They set it on the table again and said nothing. Sunlight falling through a side window struck blue flashes off the tall, slender container. It was the blue of a star held in the hand. It was the blue of a shallow ocean bay at noon. It was the blue of a diamond at morning.

"This is *it*," said Steinbeck. "I know it is. We don't have to look any more. We've found it."

"I guess you're right," said Craig, slowly. "If I see bourbon and you see nothing, it *must* be the Bottle. Are you *sure* you don't see anything?"

Steinbeck bent close and peered deeply into the blue universe of glass. "There's something *faint* there. I can almost see it, but not quite. Maybe if I open it up and let it out, what ever it is, I'll know."

"I put the stopper in tight. Here." Craig reached out.

"If you will excuse me," said a voice in the door behind them. Steinbeck and Craig did not move.

The plump gentleman with blond hair walked around into their line of vision with a gun. He did not look at their faces, he looked only at the blue glass bottle they held in their hands. He began to smile. "I hate very much to handle guns," he said, "but it is a matter of necessity now. I simply must have that work of art, and this need of mine overcomes any squeamishness I might have toward firearms. Now, the longer you refrain from giving me the Bottle, the more nervous I am inclined to become. My finger might easily cause an accident. To avoid any such unfortunate thing, I suggest that you let me take it and go."

Steinbeck was almost pleased. It had a certain beauty of timing, this incident, it was the sort of thing he might have wished for, to have the treasure stolen before it was opened. It was only Craig's presence that had forced him to go ahead with opening the Bottle anyway, and now—there was the good prospect of a chase, a fight, a series of gains and losses, and, before they were done, perhaps another four or five years spent upon a new search.

"Come along now," said the stranger. "Give it up. There's nothing in it for you, a lot for me." He shook the gun warningly.

Steinbeck handed it over.

"Thank you and goodbye," said the plump man, then hesitated. "But first, your guns. I'm afraid I'll have to take them along with me, in case you should think of following." The guns were relinquished. "This is really amazing," said the plump man. "I can't believe it was as simple as this, to walk in, to hear two men talking, and to have the Bottle simply *handed* to me."

He wandered off down the hall, out into the daylight, talking to himself.

IT WAS MIDNIGHT. The cities of Mars were bone and idle dust. Along the scattered highway the rusted car bumped and rattled, past cities where the tapestries, the meters, the gyrostats, the furniture, the paintings lay powdered over with mortar and insect wings. Past cities that were cities no longer, but only things rubbed to a fine silt that flowed senselessly back and forth on the winds between one land and another, like the sand in a gigantic hour-glass, endless pyramiding and re-pyramiding. Silence opened up to let the car pass, and closed swiftly in behind.

Craig said, "We'll never find him. These damned roads. So old. Pot-holes, lumps, everything wrong. He's got the advantage on a motorcycle, you can dodge and weave. Damn it!"

They swerved to avoid a crevasse.

"You watch the sides of the road," said Steinbeck. "He could hide until we passed and then go the opposite direction."

"Maybe he had a rocket parked somewhere and went up in it."

"Wait a minute!" Steinbeck throttled the car down. He slowed and turned about. "I saw something back there."

"Where?"

They drove back a hundred yards. "There, you see?"

In the ditch, by the side of the road, they saw a large mass.

The plump man lay folded over his motorcycle. He did not move. His eyes were wide and when Steinbeck flashed his torch down, the eyes burned dully.

Steinbeck jumped down into the ditch and retrieved a gun from under the plump man's heaviness.

3—Planet Stories—Fall

"Where's the Bottle?"

"I don't know." Steinbeck cursed.

"What killed him?"

"I don't know that either."

"The motorcycle looks okay. Not an accident. Looks as if he just let himself down here on his motorcycle and died."

Steinbeck rolled the body over. "No wounds. He stopped of his own accord."

"Heart attack. He had to stop. He got down off the highway to hide in case we came by. Thought he'd be all right. But the heart attack didn't go away. Killed him." He touched the body. "Cold. He's been dead at least five hours."

"That doesn't account for the Blue Bottle."

"Someone happened along. Lord, you know how many prospectors there are, on horseback, on foot, any old way."

They both scanned the desert around them. Far off in the starred blackness, on the cinnamon hills, they saw a dim movement.

"There!" Craig pointed.

"Looks like three men, on horseback."

"You going after them?"

"I haven't decided."

Craig opened his mouth to say something, but it was never said.

BELOW THEM, in the ditch, as they watched, the figure of the plump man glowed and began to melt. The eyes took on the aspect of moonstones under a sudden rush of water. The face began to dissolve away into fire. The hair resembled small firecracker strings, lit and sputtering. At any moment, he might explode, shatter apart, so many fragments of crystal and glass and molten lava. The body fumed. The fingers jerked with flame. Then, as if a gigantic hammer had struck a glass statue, the body cracked upward and was gone into a million shards, becoming mist as the breeze carried it across the highway.

"Good Lord," said Craig. "They must have done something to him, those three men, with a new kind of gun."

"It wasn't a gun," said Steinbeck.

"What was it, then?"

"I don't know. But I'll find out."

"Are you going to follow them?"

"Yes, I've decided. This decided me."

He pointed to where the body had been.

"It's happened before, this way. Men I knew who had the Blue Bottle. They vanished. And the Bottle passed on to others, who vanished. This is the first time I was present when it happened. It looked like a million fireflies, when he broke apart, did you notice?"

"I noticed."

"We'd better start."

"In the car?"

"Yes."

"But three against two, and we have only one gun—"

"Stay here then." Steinbeck went back to the car. He judged the desert mounds, the hills of bone-silt and cinnamon. "It'll be a hard job, but I think I can poke the car through after them. I *have* to, now. I think I know what's in the Blue Bottle, and for the first time in my life I want to have it. Always before, it was the running after it that counted. I never really wanted to find it, because I knew that what ever was in it couldn't possibly be as big as my dreams of what it should be. And now, suddenly, I realize that what I want most of all is in the Bottle. Now. Waiting for me."

"Maybe you'll think I'm a coward," said Craig, coming up to the car where Steinbeck sat in the dark, his hands on his knees. "But I'm not going with you . . . because the Bottle means nothing to me in any way. I won't die for it. You're asking to be shot by those goons out there who're running off with it. That's your business. I'll follow you up, on foot. Then, if they should capture you, maybe I can figure a way of helping you. I just want to live, Steinie. Maybe I'm different than you. You seem to want something awful bad, something even you don't know what. Me? I don't want anything but to kick around and drink and smell the air and sit down and think once in awhile. So you go on ahead and I'll walk. I just don't want to die right now. I like to walk at night, anyway, just looking around. Good luck."

"Thanks," said Steinbeck, and drove away into the dunes.

THE NIGHT was as clear as the water in a long river. It was as cool as water coming over the glass hood of the car. He drove the car over dead river washes and stones and spills of pebble,

his hands fastened to the wheel as if all of destiny were in it.

He bent forward and gave the car full throttle. In the rushing roar, for a moment, there was time to cast his mind back, to all the nights in the last ten years, nights when he had built red fires on the sea bottoms, and cooked slow, thoughtful meals to spoon into his hungry mouth. And lying down and dreaming of his wants and desires. Always those dreams of *wanting* something. Not knowing what. Ever since he was a young man, the hard life on Earth, the great Panic of 2130, the slow starvation, and then the bucking through the planets, the womanless, loveless years, the alone years. You came out of the dark into the light, out of the womb into the world, and what did you find that you *really* wanted? Nothing. Nothing could touch you or change you. Out of the dark and comfortable womb into chaos, riot, want, torture. And wasn't it the same for all men? Were the rich men any better? What about that plump man back there on the highway, dead? Wasn't *he* always looking for something *extra*? Something that he didn't have? Peace? Or what?

So what was there for men like himself? Or for anyone? Was there anything at all to look forward to?

The Blue Bottle.

He braked the car to a halt. He leaped out, the gun ready. He ran in the dunes. Ahead of him, three horses reared up in terror. He fired a shot. He aimed but there was nothing to aim at. Empty-saddled, the horses screamed and pelted off, throwing up great showers of sand. Their hooves pounded past a dead city and the bony towers fell, stone upon stone, at the echoes.

Steinbeck ran hunched over. He cocked his gun. Then he returned it to his holster.

The three men lay on the cold sand, neatly. They were Earthmen, with tan faces and rough clothes and gnarled hands. Starlight shone on the Blue Bottle which lay among them.

Far away, the horses screamed faintly and plunged on.

Steinbeck watched the bodies.

And as he watched, the bodies began to melt. They vanished away into rises of steam, into dewdrops and crystals. In a

moment they were gone.

Steinbeck felt the coldness in his body as the flakes rained across his eyes, flicking his lips and his cheeks.

He did not move.

The plump man. Dead and vanishing. Craig's voice, "Some new gun . . ."

No. Not a new gun at all.

The Blue Bottle.

They had opened it to find what they most desired. All of the desiring men down the long and lonely years had opened it to find what they most wanted in all of the planets of the universe. And all had found it, even as had these three. Now it could be understood, why the Bottle passed on so swiftly, from one to another, and the men vanishing behind it. Harvest chaff fluttering on the sand, among the dry river beds. Turning to flame and fireflies. To mist.

STEINBECK PICKED UP the bottle and held it away from himself for a long moment. His eyes shone clearly. His hands trembled.

So this is what I've been looking for? he thought. He turned the Bottle so it flashed blue starlight.

So this is what all men *really* want? the secret desire, deep inside, hid all away where we never guess? The subliminal urge. So this is what each man seeks, through some private guilt, to find?

Death.

An end to doubt, to torture, to monotony, to want, to loneliness, to fear, an end to everything.

All men?

No. Not Craig. Craig was, perhaps, far luckier. A few men were like animals in the universe, not questioning, drinking at pools and breeding and raising their young and not doubting for a moment that life was anything but good. That was Craig. There were a handful like him. Happy animals on a great reservation, in the hand of God, Craig and the men like him. With a religion and a faith that grew like a set of special nerves in them. The un-neurotic men in the midst of the billionfold neurotics. They would only want death, later, in a natural manner. Not now. Later.

Steinbeck raised the Bottle to his face. How simple, he thought, and how right. This is what I've always wanted. Nothing

else. It was always in my mind but I never took it out into the light. I couldn't admit it.

The Bottle was empty and blue in the starlight. He took an immense draught of the air coming from the Bottle, deep into his lungs.

"I have it at last," he thought.

He relaxed. He felt his body become wonderfully cool and then wonderfully warm. He knew that he was dropping down a long slide of stars into a darkness as delightful as wine. He was swimming in blue wine and lavender wine and red wine. There were candles in his chest, and firewheels spinning. He felt his hands leave him. He felt his legs fly away, amusingly. He laughed. He shut his eyes and laughed.

He was very happy for the first time in his life.

The Blue Bottle dropped onto the white sand.

AT DAWN, Craig walked along, whistling. He saw the Blue Bottle lying in the first pink light of the sun on the empty white sands. As he picked it up, there was a fiery whisper of air. A number of orange and red and purple fireflies blinked on the air, and passed on away. This place was very still.

"Here's the Bottle," said Craig. "I'll be damned." He glanced toward the dead windows of the city. "Hey, Steinbeck!" A tower collapsed into powder. "Steinbeck, here's your damn bottle! I don't want it. Come and get it!"

"Come and get it," said an echo, and the last tower fell.

Craig waited.

"That's rich," he said. "The Bottle right here and Steinbeck not even around to take advantage of it." He opened the Bottle and peered inside. "Yes, sir, just the way it was before. Full of bourbon, by hell! That's more *like* it." He drank and wiped his wet mouth. "Ah! Have another? Don't mind if I do."

He held the Bottle carelessly.

"All that trouble for a little bourbon. I'll just wait right here for Steinbeck and give him his old bottle. Meanwhile . . ."

The only sound in the dead land was the sound of liquid running into a parched throat. The Blue Bottle flashed in the sun. Craig smiled happily and drank again.

By Jay B. Drexel

THE CROWDED COLONY

Oh, how decadent these Martians were! Burke, Barnes and the rest of the Conquerors laughed loudly at the dusty shrines, those crude and homely temples in the desert. More softly laughed the Martians, who dreamed of laughing last . . .

WHEN THE MARTIANS HAD built the village of Kinkaaka there had been water in the canal, a cool, level sweep of green water from the northern icecap. Now there was none, and Kinkaaka clung to the upper swell of the bank and curved its staggered residential terraces like tragic brows over the long slope of sand and clay, the dead wall baked criss-cross by the sun, that bore at its deep juncture with the opposite bank the pitiful, straggling trench cut by Mars' last moving waters an untold time ago.

Kinkaaka's other side, away from the canal, was coated rust-red by the desert winds that came with sunset. Here were the crumbling market arenas of the ancient traders, the great mounds of underground warehouses long empty; and here now, with Mars' conquest, was the "native" section into whose sandstone huts the village's few inhabitants were shoved firmly, but not brutally, to rest when they weren't needed to work.

Like most of the Conquerors, Jack Burke and his companions preferred the canal side of Kinkaaka. There they could sit in the stone-cool shade of the Expedition Restaurant and look through the broad glassless windows down the sun-scaled canal bank, across to the opposite slope with its dotting of nomad caves, the desert beyond and the red-tainted blue of the sky.

"Happy day we came to Mars," said Jack Burke. He picked up his stone mug and drank with a shudder.

He was big and brown, typical of the Conquerors, and spoke, as they all did

when within earshot of natives, the Martian dialect which the Linguistics Squad had translated and reasoned to completion from the pages of script found in the metal cairn, half-buried in desert sands and upon which they had conveniently almost landed their space-cube upon arrival two days ago.

That was one of the dicta of the Psychologists: Always speak the native tongue, and learn it preferably from graphics or a specimen before contacting the native collective.

There were other policies as strange, or more so; but the Psychologists, off-world in the home-ship and poring over the translations beamed to them, must know what they were doing.

Barnes looked up in quick response to Burke's sarcasm. Of the three Conquerors at this table, he was the smallest. He fiddled nervously with his one-pronged fork, turning a piece of badly cooked *huj* over and over, not looking at it.

"That," he said, and he included the *huj*, "is a mouthful. There doesn't seem to be a Martian in this village who can cook worth a damn, and you—" this to the pasty faced Martian who stood attentively by—"are no exception. You're getting off easy with this job, Martian. Or would you rather go back to digging up history with the rest of your tribe?"

"I am sorry." The Martian advanced and bobbed his head. "The preparation of your foodstuffs is difficult for me to comprehend. Would you care to try something else, perhaps?"

Barnes skidded the fork onto the plate



"There goes a pretty decent person," said Burke. "I'm glad we don't have to kill him."

and put his hands flat on the stone table. "No. Just take this away."

The Conquerors watched the creature as it moved silently off with the plate of *huj*. All except Randolph, the youngest of the trio.

HE SAT nearest the stone-silled window, his gaze reaching out distantly over the sandscape. On the far bank of the canal he could see a few natives with their guards, emerging from a wood and stone structure that thrust finger-shaped into the pink sky.

"No race should have its soul dissected," he said slowly. "Not, at least, until they're extinct and can't feel it." He avoided Barnes' sudden, sharp look. "Our Archaeologists over there—" pointing at the moving dots—"are poking around in burial crypts or sacred temples or whatever—it's like cutting someone up alive. We don't know what those things mean to these Martians."

Barnes laughed, more of a snort. "You speak as if 'these Martians' were people." He leaned forward and blinked his emphasis. "What in hell ever happened to you that you've got such ideas? Primitive, misshapen morons—you can't think of them as persons! Don't let an Intelligence Officer hear you talking that way or you'll find yourself getting shipped home!"

Randolph's eyes flicked Barnes' heavy face, then turned to the mural on the restaurant wall.

"This is very beautiful," he said. He bent closer, examining the delicate work. "This isn't moronic. You're wrong, Barnes."

Burke spoke harshly: "You'd better shut up, Randolph. You're sitting there emoting over decadent art and there's an Intelligence Officer at the bar."

Young Randolph stiffened and forced a smile. "Of course, the Martians are a degenerated race. Our Archaeologists have revealed that Mars was spiritually effeminized thousands of years ago. Our colonization will have a reforming effect upon them. It is a healthy thing. That is our mission in time and space."

The Martian had returned and was again standing at service. Randolph caught his eye and flushed, returned his gaze to the mural.

Burke cleared his throat. The Intelligence Officer at the bar was still looking icily at Randolph's back, twiddling his drink with a wooden mixer.

"You cannot doubt," Barnes took up the fraying thread, "that our conquest of these Martians is a very good thing. For them. I . . . for us, too . . . That is our mission in time and space. The first desert shrine—the metal one from which we learned this tongue we speak—is ugly enough proof. Sheaves of manuscript, recording the most disgusting standards and attitudes. And the contents of subsequently found structures—like that one across the canal—show an even greater decline into sensualism and the subjugation of creative energies."

The Martian stood quietly, his small-featured face blank and smooth. He was meant to hear all this.

"I heard one of our Archaeologists say something about the language of that first shrine—the metal one—being different from all the others." Randolph shifted his great bulk to lean back against the wall. "The others are mostly alike, but this one we learned is totally different."

The Martian's eyes flickered.

"So what?" Barnes grunted. "Dialects. Same thing at home."

"But, I mean they—"

"But what? These Martians here speak the language we learned, don't they?"

"But—"

"Hell! Do you speak *Ahrian*?"

"You know I don't."

"So when we get through investigating here and move on to other villages, we'll find Martians who speak the other dialects."

The Martian said: "Will there be anything else, sirs?"

"Not," said Barnes, "unless you would like to try some *noedan*."

"No thank you, sir."

Randolph and Burke raised their eyehoods humorously. Then they looked a little less amused as Barnes' voice hardened.

"You might like it, Martian. Try it." He pulled a tough green wad of *noedan* from his pouch and tore off a strip. "I think the sooner you Martians get used to doing as we do and liking the things we like, the better off you'll be. Now take this *noedan* and use it."

"Oh, for hell's sake, Barnes—" Randolph put out a hand. "Let him alone. He doesn't want it. It makes him sick."

The Intelligence Officer got up from the bar and started for the table, his eyes hard, his aural fronds quivering with emotion.

Burke spotted him and seemed to shrug. "You asked for it, kid," he told Randolph. "Give my love to the home worlds. You're through on Mars."

"Maybe that's what I wanted," said Randolph.

THE INTELLIGENCE OFFICER halted beside the table and Randolph got up without a word and left with him. Burke and Barnes watched them down the winding clay street, saw them enter a portable teleport booth, one of the several scattered about Kinkaaka to facilitate trips to and from the space-cube. The door closed, the light blinked on and off, then the booth was open again, empty.

"On his way back to the home-ship and Parna," grunted Burke, "and I don't know but that I envy him."

"You too?"

"Yeah. Now that there's no damned Intelligence Officer around, me too."

"Disgrace and all?"

"That's what stops me—" and noticing the angry color to Barnes' *uiye*—"and the glory of our mission. Hell, anyone can get homesick, can't they?"

During the few moments of Randolph's arrest and departure the Martian had disappeared. Barnes grunted and shoved the *noedan* back into his pouch and finished his drink.

"You'll never get anywhere acting like that," said Burke after a short silence. "You can't shove our ways down their throats and get cooperation."

Barnes got up a little angrily. "Who wants to get anywhere? What do we want out of these creatures? They smell! How are we *supposed* to act? We own their smelly little world—"

"Randolph might say we don't own it."

"Shut up, Burke. I'm sick of that!"

Barnes started for the door and Burke got up to follow. They stepped out onto the hot clay of the street, moving their top-skins against the tight-fitting impact of the sun's rays.

"I don't want anything from them, Burke. *I'm* the one who should be sent home. *I* want to go home. Why should we go around labeled with Martian names? Barnes, Randolph, Burke, Smith—good God! And talking this *jsu*-twisting *sutz* of a language Martian of all the time speaking!"

Burke chuckled, deep in his sac. "The Psychologists dreamed it up—to make us seem less alien. We speak their sounds. And we take their names. After all, no trouble at all is better than the little they might be able to give us if they got excited."

They went down the street toward the teleport booth, two big octopoids, the sun warming their glistening brown backs.

THE "MARTIAN" was in the cool back room of the restaurant, seated before a group of his kind. This was afternoon rest period, and some freedom to congregate existed then.

A man turned from the wall slit through which he had watched the exit of Burke and Barnes.

"Those things make me sick, Burke," he said to the "Martian". "How can you get so close to them and keep your stomach? They smell."

Burke shrugged. "You get used to it, Barnes."

He bent down and lifted the lid of a box that was stamped: FIRST MARS EXPEDITION—2006. He took out a heavy proton-buster, broke the grip and examined its load of white pellets.

"It's been two days now," he went on, "and I'm convinced at last that this one party is all. Scouts, perhaps, from a parent ship off in deep space. And I've listened to them talk. If they don't return, nobody's going to come looking for them. They come from that kind of society. The others will mark Sol off as a bad bet and move on."

He clicked the gun together. "They still think we're the race pictured in the Martian crypts and temples—and in our translations, Randolph. Coincidence eh? that the old Martians were humanoid and their appearance not discrepant with ours."

"We colonize Mars," mused Randolph, "and Beta Centauri colonizes us as Martians. Ring around the rosy."

Burke stood there, the proton-buster in

his hand. "And it was cosmic coincidence that the Centurians landed their ship at practically the same spot we'd set down only three days before. And it's almost incredible that they came to this village where we had taken up headquarters and addressed us in English!" He turned to Barnes. "You're the Psych-man . . . let's have it again. Slowly."

Barnes half turned from the wall slit where he had been keeping an eye out for Centaurians. "They found our ship and took it to be a primitive shrine of some sort, never dreaming it was a vehicle, a space-craft." He waved another man to the slit and stretched his legs as he sat down on a crate. He struck a match and cupped it into his pipe. "I'm almost certain that they didn't even recognize the mechanisms as such. Their ship, as you've all seen, is a cube of pure energy, configured—they're that alien. Also, I believe they're military men, soldiers and minor technicians. The top specialists are probably on the other ship, away from possible danger and biding their talents until called."

The watcher's hand went up and fluttered for silence, and Barnes paused while heavy, meaty footsteps scuffled the clay outside. When they had passed, he spoke again, softly:

"Fortunately, there wasn't room in our ship for a library, or they might have encountered the Terrestrial mind and caught on. But they learned our language—English, and a damned neat trick—from Randolph's written translations of the Martian *inscripciones sensuales* he was working on. And when they came here and addressed us in that language and we responded, nolens-volens they took us for Martians and judged us by the context of those translations—foolish, vain and harmless, but perhaps with some value as workers. They even took our names from the nameplates on our bunks, something that would have found favor with the perverse Fourth-Era Martians they presumed us to be." He sucked at his pipe which had gone out. "Their Psychologists are clever—maybe a little too clever. They think we have no violence potential."

Randolph seemed almost entranced. "But how could they have worked out the phonetics?"

Barnes grinned, lifted a shoulder in admiration and envy. "I don't know . . . Ask them."

"They couldn't know they were *our* names," said Randolph.

"No, but they thought they were native names. Thank God, we got the pitch right off and were able to carry the farce."

"Why didn't they just kill us?"

BARNES FROWNED and struck another match. "That would've been the really smart thing to do, Dolph, but they're not brutes and they're not making war. Their intention is to colonize, and we might as well be insects for all we could mean to them or do to stand up to them."

"But if we have to be dealt with at all, we're in the way—"

Barnes had the pipe going. He shook his head. "We're not in their way; we're underfoot, and only a sick mind makes a point of stepping on ants. Would you kill a talking louse?"

Randolph grinned. "Yes."

"No, you wouldn't—not until you'd given it a going over."

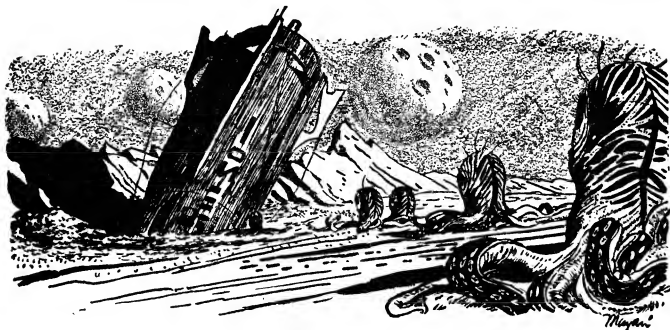
"They're not sick in a killing way," Burke grunted, "but they seem to feel that their colonizations act as cathartic to wayward worlds. Just look at them, and you know that's sick."

"The people," said Barnes, "at the bottom of any movement—a pun, gentlemen—are always fed on dream-stuff. Soldiers always are. Truth is, maybe the big boys at home think they can find enough use for us to warrant keeping us alive. As laborers, as subjects for experimentation, as pets."

Burke looked out the window at the reddening sky. Then he gathered their attention by standing up.

"If we hadn't been here," he said, "they would have gone on to Earth and taken over. As is, they think Mars is nothing to write home about, but they're sticking around to study awhile—not us, the supposed latter Martians, the degenerates, but to search out and study the bones of Mars' civilization back when it was dynamic. Maybe there's something worth learning. That's what they think."

He hefted the proton-buster. Barnes and Smith and Kirk and Randolph and



Jason and all the others got guns from the box.

There was a hiss and they turned to the window. Rising above the visible cluster of roof-domes from some point in the other side of the village was a smaller edition of the Centaurians' space-cube. It glinted once, high up, and was gone.

"There goes a pretty decent person," said Burke. "I'm glad we don't have to kill him. He appreciated Randolph's water-color painting of the canal." His voice

was regretful. "How alien can you get? His name was Randolph, and he's going home in disgrace."

Night was coming. Burke's face hardened. The Centaurians would be coming too, ready to herd the Martians into their sleeping huts.

"One alien ship, terribly armed," Burke went on, "and sixty Centaurians walking around unarmed because they think we're pansies." He cocked the gun. "They'll never leave Kinkaaka to bring back more."

A little Time - Travel . . .

To give you a glimpse of future

PLANETS

• IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE LAST TWO ALIVE!

A Novel of Chaos and Rebirth by ALFRED COPPEL

MITKEY RIDES AGAIN

Sequel to THE STARMOUSE by FREDERIC BROWN

CARRY ME HOME

by C. H. LIDDELL

CARGO TO CALLISTO

By JAY B. DREXEL

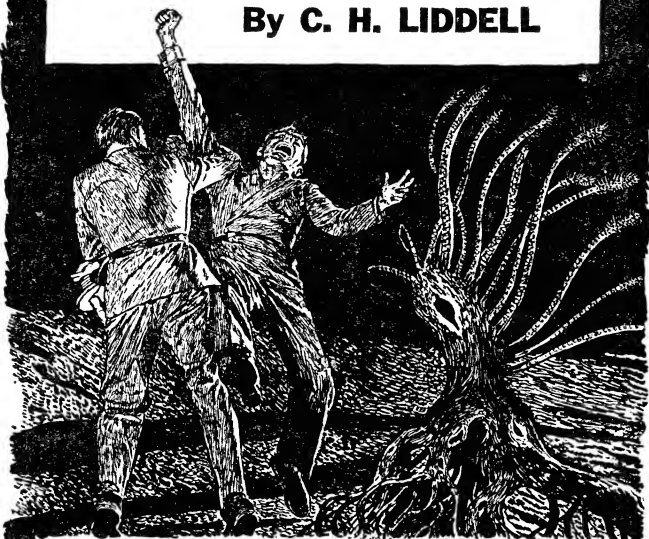
Also Stories by John D. McDonald • Allen K. Lang • Fox B. Holden

• *Coming up soon . . .* **RAYMOND Z. GALLUN, WILLIAM TERN, RAY BRADBURY, NOEL LOOMIS, BRYCE WALTON and many others!**

THE SKY IS FALLING

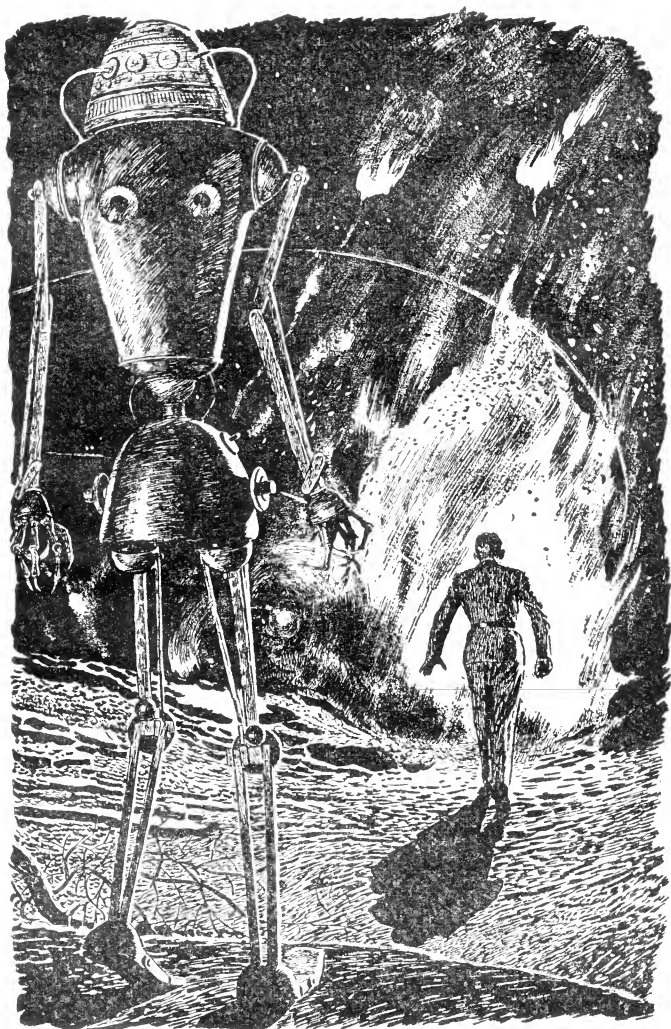
The Blow-Up was coming. It was near, near . . . Johnny Dyson knew he would see it soon. One minute, Earth. The next . . . little Nova, weeping radioactive dust into the void. Then Johnny and the Robot would build an Eden on Mars . . .

By C. H. LIDDELL



JOHNNY WONDERED WHEN the spaceship would get there. He didn't know where "there" was—nobody knew. But he was anxious for landing-day to come. It would give day a real meaning, after the endless artificial days and nights of the ship.

Not that the ship wasn't comfortable, and not that there wasn't purpose in that comfort. Johnny would have to be in perfect shape



"Benjy! What's the matter with you? Earth's gone . . . we're safe!"

when the hour of landing finally came and his *job* would begin. Because he wanted to be in condition to do the job, he had trained his mind to complete relaxation.

So he lay back in his deep chair and watched the viziports with their troubling tri-dimensional visions of what no longer existed. Blue sky, white clouds, birds, the tops of buildings—he closed his eyes. Perhaps it had been a mistake, after all, this hiding the blackness of space by camouflage. He didn't want to remember Earth. There was no Earth. There was a shaking white blaze among the stars, somewhere a long way back now, and that was all. No Earth.

All that remained of it was himself, this ship, the robot that took care of them both, and the images that filled the viziports with nostalgic pictures.

The rest was over, finished. He didn't often let himself think about the unpleasant past, or how, for himself, the beginning of the end had happened. . . .

LEANING BACK against the bulkhead, Johnny Dyson smiled.

"Go on," he said to the hooked fish named Benny White.

White tipped his head back cautiously because of the cumbersome helmet he wore, sprouting wires like Medusa-hair. He looked at his own foreshortened image reflected dimly in the steel ceiling and nodded sagely at himself.

"Yeah," he said, "I learned about women from her. I sure did. Toughest tomato I ever met, then or since. Only one thing ever scared Poochie—I called her Poochie—"

Beyond the steel walls lay the endless red hills of Mars. Beyond the steel ceiling hung Orion in a blue-black sky lighted by tumbling moons. Somewhere between here and Orion rolled a time-bomb called Earth with its fuse set and lighted and the hours ticking along toward Blow-Up.

"I called her Poochie," White said. "If I told you her real name you'd be surprised. After she swiped my dough and divorced me she went right on to the top. What a woman. Now she owns half of—"

Johnny Dyson thought of the take-off, scheduled for noon tomorrow. Back to Earth. Back to the eve of Armageddon.

"Back to the world I never made," he thought fiercely. "*—I, a stranger and afraid—*"

Well, he had a right to be afraid. He knew what was coming. He thought:

Problem: To keep the ship on Mars.

Method: To steal the atonic fuel.

It was perfectly simple. All good plans were simple. Unfortunately it depended on the simple mind of White whether or not the plan worked out. And White was a well-hooked fish, all right, but he wasn't landed yet. He wore the transmitter that controlled the ship's robot. And the robot was the key to the fuel supply which could bridge the long jump between Mars, where life could be an Eden, and Earth, where life was doomed. Sooner or later, sooner or later . . .

"Oh, well," White was saying. "Funny thing is, there's a warrant out for my arrest back on Earth, and the company that issued it belongs to Poochie lock, stock and barrel. She don't know about it, of course." He chuckled sardonically.

"Think I could get her to quash that warrant? No, sir. Only one thing ever scared that woman. Thunder. If I went to Poochie right now—only it'd be a long walk—if I went to her and said, 'Poochie, remember how you used to try to crawl in my pocket whenever it thundered? Well, now, for old time's sake—'"

He grinned, shaking his head until the Medusa-wires whined against each other.

"That woman," he said admiringly. "That woman. She'd put the cuffs on me herself. Tough as pig-iron. Never was very pretty, but she looks like a hippo these days. My opinion, if she ever got the idea of conquering the world, she'd do it. Oh well. She went up. I didn't."

"What's the warrant for?" Dyson asked, not caring.

"Larceny. I guess I sort of miscalculated there." White grinned again. "Not so good, is it? I look older than I am, the life I led, but I'm under fifty. And I always felt I had my best years ahead. Still feel that way. I'd hate to waste 'em in jail. I'll tell you, Johnny, I kind of like your idea of staying on here. Not going back. Nobody to say, 'Move along, bud.' And then there's lots of things I always wanted to do, never been let. Lots

of things. On Earth, I'd never get a chance."

Now they were getting to it. Dyson kept the eagerness out of his voice with rigid control. All he said was, "We're in Eden, Benjy. We've got all the power we need in the batteries—safe power. Safe atomic power. We've got the robot. People were right when they said heaven was in the sky, Benjy. Mars is heaven."

"Mm-m. Sometimes Mars is underneath, too. Still, the closer I get to that larceny rap, the more I like your idea. Just like Paradise. Milk and honey for free. All we'd need is some hours," White said, mispronouncing it.

"You can't have everything."

"Guess not. Still, it almost seems like in this set-up you got planned, I could wish for anything and just get it. If I wished for a woman—" He snorted. "I might get Poochie, come to think of it. Oh, Lord. Maybe later we could put the robot to work on quasi-biology. I recollect something about surrogate plasms. If I could rig the genes in advance I could maybe work out a nice, comfortable little lady and speed up her growing time. Wonder how long it'd take her to hit biological twenty? It's an idea, Johnny, it's an idea."

"Sure, why not? Wish on a star. All you need's to be on the right star. This is it. We can do anything we want, and there's nobody to stop us."

"Martine," White said.

"Two against one. Benjy?"

"Yeah?"

"We can do it. Right now."

White's brows lifted.

"What's happened? Not—" His face changed. He tilted his head to stare at the dull reflection in the ceiling. Beyond it he was seeing the night sky and the blue-green star of Earth.

"Oh no, no," Dyson said quickly. "Not the Blow-Up. Not yet, anyhow."

White shrugged. "May never come," he said, and stretched his arm out for a cigarette on the table beside him. "May never come at all."

"It'll come," Dyson said quietly. "It doesn't matter a hoot whether or not our cargo gets back to Earth. Ever since the Forties physicists have been looking for an atomic safety, and if they couldn't even find it through artificial radio-elements,

what good can Martian ores do? We've wasted six months mining junk."

"Can't tell that," White said, blowing smoke. "We got no equipment for refining and testing. All we do is hunt, dig and load. The rest is up to the physics boys."

Dyson shook his head.

"It'll come," he insisted. "Ever since Alamogordo it's been coming. So I say, what's the use of going back? All you'll get out of it's jail. All I'll get is—oh, I don't know. More hard work, more worries, the same old routine. And for what? The Blow-Up. That's all. Why work?"

WHITE, sitting on the edge of the bunk, humped himself forward, elbows on knees, cigarette dangling from his lips. The wires of the helmet cast complex shadows over his face. He didn't answer.

Dyson said eagerly, "We can pull our plan right now, Benjy. Martine's micro-photographing the log. He'll be busy for a couple of hours more anyway. We'll have all the time we need to hide the fuel."

White tried absently to scratch his head and tangled his fingers in a maze of insulated wiring.

"Not so fast," he said. "What's the big rush? We got to think this over. I'm not going to haul that fuel around. Even if I had lead skin, I'd still say no thanks."

"Who's asking you to haul fuel? All you've got to do is hand over that transmitter."

White looked at him sidewise. His eyes grew slightly glassy. "Hold on there. The robot's got to stay energized. It takes somebody's mind to do that. If I took it off—"

"I'd put it on."

"Yes, but—look here, there might be trouble if I—"

"Martine's busy, I tell you."

"I mean robot trouble. Suppose we need the critter in an emergency? After all, the robot's the lad who's got to pilot us home."

"Not if we don't go. Look, Benjy. We won't be leaving Mars. Got that?"

White screwed up his face dubiously. "Yeah," he said.

"Okay. That means the ship will be immobilized. Got that too?"

White blew smoke and studied it, squinting.

"Sure."

"So we don't have to worry about the robot. All it's going to do is take the fuel out and hide it where Martine can't find it. Got that?"

White snorted and inhaled smoke.

"Sure I got it. I ain't dumb. Even if they did pick three beat-up techs like us for this crazy trip, that don't mean my head's soft yet. I get it, all right. Only, I got my orders about this robot. Martine would blow his top if he caught you with the helmet on."

"I know how to handle the thing. I've done it before."

"Not since the Chief caught you passing the buck to the robot," White said with the air of one capturing a minor pawn.

That had happened a month before when Dyson, wearing the transmitter, had sent the robot down a deep crevasse to test rock strata. Martine had objected violently. While the robot was far stronger and more agile than a man, it was also much heavier and more fragile, even in the decreased gravity of Mars. Obviously too, Martine considered the robot much less expendable than Johnny Dyson. Insofar as this argument applied to the social unit it was true, since the piloting of the ship depended on the precision, memory and integration of the robot. Dyson, however, remained unconvinced.

Now he grinned. "You learn by experience," he said. "This time he won't catch me. Just hand the transmitter over. I know what I'm doing."

"Well," White said, "well—of course if we do it at all, the robot's the boy to send. If a shield or a damper should slip I'd rather the robot was carrying the stuff than me. I'd hate to get my bones sunburned. Only, what about afterwards?"

"Martine? Oh, he'll come around. He'll have to. He can't get away without fuel. He'll find out Mars is a nice place to live—not to visit."

"I wonder about that," White murmured, and Dyson's eyes narrowed. He drew a deep breath. So much depended on this fool, this fool—

"I thought you were convinced," he said, after a safe interval.

"Take it easy. I didn't say no, did I? I got that larceny rap to think of. But—" he made a wrinkled grimace of indecision and touched the control button at his fore-

head with a hesitating hand.

"Go on," Dyson urged. "Take it off. From now on you can relax. You're free. You can do anything you want. Only give me the helmet."

WHITE PUT BOTH HANDS to the steel crown of the thing, lifted it a little, rolled frightened eyes at Dyson and then suddenly, with a gesture of abnegation, raised it from his head and held it out. The white line its pressure had left on his forehead turned pink. He wrinkled his brow anxiously.

"Careful, now, careful," he said unnecessarily. "Look out for that cord. And cut down to minimum before you put it on. Easy, now. Turn it up easy, Johnny."

Dyson paid no attention to him. This was his moment of triumph, and Benjy White had ceased to exist. A slow warmth seeped through his skull from the contact of the helmet, and the remote vibrations he felt were like the vibrations of music heard from far away. The music of the spheres, he thought. With this on his head he could control a planet—if Martine gave him another five minutes of freedom.

"We'll have to take the robot outside," he said. "Got a control unit on a portable?"

"Sure have." White did things to a wall panel and a square box slid out and cradled itself on a carriage with flexible telescoping legs.

"Two miles of wire will do," Dyson said. "I've got the place for the cache spotted."

"Two miles . . . mm-m. Two . . . got it. Johnny, you really figure there won't be rescue ships sent out for us?"

"Not a chance. Millions for defense, but try to get a few bucks spent on an expedition like ours, once our work's done. Rescue ships, ha. Rescue ships take expensive equipment. They take man-hours. You can't waste stuff like that, Benjy. Ask the Energy Allocation Board. It took a miracle to get this ship out and another to keep it from going for military defense."

Dyson was talking with the topmost level of his mind, waiting for enough power to accumulate, listening to the music grow stronger and stronger in his skull.

"Maybe so," White said doubtfully.

"What if the Chief sends out a signal, though? He might do it somehow. He might mark a big SOS out on the desert."

Dyson considered the possibility, weaving it in and out of that beautiful, distant vibration of music. Martine was a problem, of course. But any problem could be solved, if you approached it the right way.

"He'll come around," he said. "It's two against one, remember. Once he knows he can't ever get back to Earth, he'll come around. Once he knows our plans . . . Who'd turn down Eden?"

"Oh, it sounds like a lazy man's paradise, all right," White said. "That's for me. Little streams of whiskey come trickling down the rocks. Just the same, I'd kind of like to see our cargo get back home."

"What for? It's no good."

"Can't tell. It might be. All I'm saying is, I wish I could kick the ship on the rump and send her back to Earth."

"How can the ship get back without the robot to guide it?" Dyson asked in a too-patient voice, his eyes unfocused as he concentrated on the gathering power in the helmet.

HE TOUCHED IT with a tentative finger and then bent to the mirror set in the wall to read the reversed image of the dial set in the helmet's front. "Won't be long now," he murmured. "We're going to need the robot, Benjy. Just remember that. Unless you want to work like a dog."

"I been working like a dog all my life," White said. "And all the bones had the meat chewed off before I got 'em. Oh, I'm convinced, Johnny, but I can't help thinking about Poochie."

"You'd have plenty of time to think about her in jail."

"Guess so. Tell you what. Maybe later we can figure a way to get the cargo home. If we built another robot—it might take quite a while, but if we managed it—we could spare the one we got now."

"Why not?" Dyson agreed quickly. "Plenty of time to work that out later on."

"Plenty. We'll want something to keep us busy, after Eden's all built. I just—" He grinned a little sheepishly. "I don't know, I guess I just hate to give up without a struggle."

"We aren't!" Dyson was stung. "There's no use struggling when you haven't got a

chance. If there *was* a chance I'd be the last man to give up, Benjy. I'd fight to the last ditch. But Earth's as good as gone, and . . . oh, shut up. Don't think about it."

But he could feel it and see it—the solid planet shuddering underfoot, buckling above hollow emptiness, and the mushroom cloud rolling majestically toward the sky. Was it Man's fault? He'd picked up that fatally sharp knife of his own volition, but who gave Man the knife in the first place? God? It was the fruit of the tree of knowledge, all right, and to taste it was to die. God's fault, then, not Adam's.

"Let's go," he said abruptly. "We haven't got all the time in the world. Where's the robot?"

"Storage. Johnny, you thought how a court of law might feel about this?"

"The same way they'd feel about larceny, maybe," Dyson said, and walked the control carriage out the door. As he tiptoed it along the passage he could hear White padding after him, worrying softly under his breath.

Luckily they didn't have to pass Martine's door. Dyson urged the carriage faster, watched the trundling box rock hastily along before him like a dog on a leash. A plump Scotty, perhaps, with greyhound legs. He squeezed the bulb at the leash's end and the Scotty sprinted.

Its radioactive sodium battery had a half-life of three years. After that, the battery could be recharged, but not without a pile to produce the right isotope. And there were no atomic piles on Mars. And there never would be. Plenty of storage batteries in the ship, but all of those, even hooked up in series, couldn't throw enough power into the ship to overcome Martian gravity. No, Mars hugged the ship to her bosom now with an unbreakable grip. Mars the mother, restraining it with strong apron strings, however foolishly it might try to plunge back across space to the world where doom awaited it. Mars would receive and hide the fuel and hold the ship to her bosom forever.

The batteries would be useful, though. They'd help provide all the comforts of home. This world, Dyson assured himself, was going to be a perfect Eden, an Eden with modern plumbing.

He reined the control carriage to a halt

and opened the door at his shoulder. There was the robot, waiting in storage. It hung cradled in a resilient mould that rocked occasionally as balances automatically shifted and compensated inside the grey, gleaming body.

GIGANTIC AND INHUMAN. Segmented like an ant, thorax and abdomen linked by a universal joint. Many specialized limbs. That was the robot. It had bulb-shaped eyes set in its abdomen, for underwater vision. A turret-tower of mosaic eyes, some for day and some for night, rose from the top of the thorax.

Lion-yellow, these eyes looked at Dyson.

Urging the carriage before him, he stepped quickly into the room and moved to one side uneasily, trying to elude that steady stare. But he could not, of course. There were always facets whose optic axes faced the observer accurately enough to reveal the dark pigments around the visual sense-cells. Any spider can do the same trick. But the false pupils' stare unnerved Dyson.

He reached for a dial on the control unit. White hissed a nervous warning from the door, and Dyson closed his mouth on an equally nervous retort. After all, it had been over a month since he had worn the transmitter, and if the robot fell down the noise would wake the dead.

He turned the dial very gently. The music deepened in his skull. And the robot stirred majestically, lifting its thorax. You could hear oiled steel moving sweetly on oiled steel. Solemnly the great gleaming creature climbed from its cradle and crossed the room, walking with no remotest likeness to the motion of life.

Dyson met it in the center of the floor, at the chart-table, shooing the control-carriage before him on its nimble legs. Together man and robot bent above the table, the robot's thoracic section hanging enormous above Dyson's shoulder, reared upright and curving over him while a compound crown of eyes focused on the maps.

Dyson spun the selector until the right chart came up and spread itself out on the table in moulded relief that took the shadows of the room in miniature perfection, casting long fingers of shade across the tiny

plastic valleys that duplicated what lay just outside the ship. It was perfect duplication. every hill slope and plateau showing clear. There was even—and Dyson blinked to see it—a blunt oval replica of the ship they stood in.

He felt a little dizzy, half believing that inside that vinylite bulge on the map was a doll-sized room where a doll-sized Johnny Dyson stood watching a doll-sized chart...

Above him the robot creaked conscientiously as it lowered its compound focus toward the map. Dyson shook off the illusion of infinitely repeated Johnny Dysons receding into the microcosm and touched the map with a careful finger, thinking into the transmitter as his fingers traced a course from the ship across the plain and up the hillside. The robot watched. Faint, remote clickings could be heard from inside it as it memorized the path.

Dyson was just attempting to shake off the further illusion that a multiplicity of other and larger Johnny Dysons extended the opposite way, into the macrocosm, when a harsh, crisp voice spoke like God's, out of the air.

"Dyson!" the voice said. "Dyson!"

WHITE INHALED with a soft, appalled gasp. Dyson looked up sharply, feeling his stomach turn over. For he hadn't heard the inter-com click on. There had been no warning. And that *could* mean it had been on all the time. His voice and White's could have been babbling their mutinous plans straight into Martine's office, straight into his listening ears.

"Dyson, report to my room. At once!"

Dyson gulped. Then he shook his head at White and lifted a warning finger. If the inter-com had been open both ways, caution didn't matter now. Still, if Martine knew what they were doing, why waste time with the inter-com. The Chief's quarters were less than half a ship's length away. And Martine had long legs and a loaded revolver.

"Reporting, sir," Dyson said hoarsely. "That's all."

There was no concluding click to prove the inter-com had been shut off. Dyson kept his finger raised.

White was having difficulty in swallowing.

There was still a chance, a good chance if Dyson hurried. He bent over the chart again, moving his finger along the course he meant the robot to travel. He worked fast, but accurately. His orders clicked out with almost mechanical precision into the precise, mechanical brain of the robot. It took about thirty seconds to finish.

Then the robot stepped back. Its huge thorax lowered on the gently purring joint, and it walked quickly out of the room. Walked—rolled—glided. There is no word for the gait of an organism like that. It went smoothly and quite fast, making no sound except for the faint, small noises within it as mechanisms adjusted to the task at hand. Clicking with metallic thoughts, it moved away.

Now it would go directly to the fuel supply chamber. Dyson's mind ran ahead of the great shining ant-shaped thing and traced its course out of the ship and across the face of Mars, as he had just traced it across the map. Over the plain, up the slope, into the cavern he had found weeks ago and marked for just this purpose. Load by load the fuel would accumulate there until not an ounce remained in the ship. And nobody but Johnny Dyson would ever know where it was. Nobody, that is, if the robot's memory track were erased in time.

As the huge, majestic metal thing vanished down the corridor White caught Dyson's eye and drew his finger across his throat.

Dyson grinned. He reached for a stylo pad with one hand and turned down the control-power with the other.

"All set," he wrote. "Robot has orders. Keep transmitter on. Robot will signal when finished. Then erase memory track." He underlined the last sentence twice for emphasis and held it under White's nose.

God's voice spoke again, peremptorily out of the empty air.

"Dyson! I'm waiting!"

"Yes, sir—coming."

Now he would have to move fast. He waited impatiently—and yet reluctantly, too—while the music of the spheres died slowly out of his skull. While its faint vibrations still rang he lifted the helmet off and fitted it on White's head. Neither of them dared to speak.

Dyson turned and ran.

4—Planet Stories—Fall

HE SLOWED DOWN by the time he reached Martine's closed door, and his strong will buckled slightly in the middle. What was going to happen now? Suppose Martine's first words were an accusation?

... Never mind, the take-off was due tomorrow. All three men would be needed. At worst, Martine would say unpleasant things. They might be very unpleasant—if the inter-com had been on long enough.

Actually, the more urgent thing was what White would do. His conviction was shaky, at best. And he had full control of the robot now. He was entirely capable of recalling it, replacing the fuel and letting events take their own disastrous course, back to Earth, if Dyson left him alone long enough for his nerve to fail. So much depended on Dyson now—so terribly much.

He had a moment's deep longing to lay his burden down. If he just stood here silent long enough, something might happen . . .

Which was, he realized, exactly the sort of philosophy that kept Earth rolling along the old familiar groove toward atomic holocaust.

He made himself knock on the door.

* * *

Martine's collar was open at the throat. He had his shoes off and his feet in neatly darned wool socks were crossed comfortably on the desk. Johnny Dyson stared at him in shocked amazement. He had never seen the Chief before except in full uniform, rigidly correct. Now Martine's face reminded him somehow of the robot deactivated. When he saw the bottle on the desk he knew why.

For the first time he saw that Martine had a fat, soft face.

The big slob, Dyson thought exultantly. So he's solved that problem, all by himself. He's got a turn-off switch, after all. I won't have to kill him, later on. There won't be any trouble I can't handle. He can have all the whiskey he wants. We can make the stuff. Just pull out the nail in his foot, let the fire drain out, and refill with ninety-proof Martian *vin du pays*, home brewed. No, distilled. Doesn't matter. You can make the stuff out of any-

thing. All you need is a ferment. And there's plenty of ferment in this ship right now.

He restrained his immediate mad impulse to spit in Martine's eye and declare his intentions, which was probably just as well, for the Chief kept a revolver in his desk. Dyson waited, at attention, until Martine, who had been looking vacantly at the ceiling, glanced down and saw him.

"Oh. At ease. Sit down, Dyson."

"Yessir," Dyson said with a respect he no longer felt. It was hard to keep the triumph out of his voice. He should have realized that Martine had to be a second-rater too. They couldn't have spared him for this trip if he'd been first rate. "Thanks, sir," he said.

Martine waved at the desk, where a second, and empty, glass stood beside a full one and the bottle.

"Pour yourself a drink, Dyson."

THIS WAS too good to be true. Dyson moved forward willingly, because from the desk he could see the inter-com switch. While whiskey gurgled into the glass he leaned forward enough to observe that the switch was closed, after all. So Martine hadn't heard a thing. So the plan should work out perfectly, if White played along.

"Happy landings, sir," he said, lifting his small glass.

"Happy landings," Martine nodded, sniffing at his.

But they meant very different things. Dyson was thinking, "We've already made ours. And it's going to be happy ever after, world without end, amen." Not like Earth. *This is the way the world ends*—how did that line go? That quoted-to-death line with the irritating ending. He couldn't quite remember. *This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but—but—* Never mind.

"You're off duty," Martine said. "Relax."

"I'll try, sir."

"We've done a hard job," Martine said with satisfaction. "Six months in the field. Shoddy equipment. Only three of us to do everything. It's been quite a responsibility. If anything had gone wrong—" He took another drink. "Well, the ore's loaded, the records went off to Earth half an hour

ago and everything's done. Every microscopic, piddling, vital detail. Tomorrow we go on duty again. But our mission's accomplished."

"For all the good it will do in the long run," Dyson said, and told himself to shut up. He looked down warily at the glass in his hand, surprised to find it empty. Careful, Johnny, careful, he thought.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know. After all, the nuclear physics boys have been working on the problem a long time without getting anywhere, haven't they? I don't see—"

"Are you a qualified nuclear physicist?"

"I came within an ace of being one," Dyson said.

Martine stared at him. "What happened?"

"Oh, I don't know." Dyson shrugged. "I guess I just realized finally how hopeless it all was. A good thing, too, from my viewpoint. If I were qualified now I'd be back home working on military projects like all the other competent boys. Whether they want to or not. It's practically martial law back there now."

"Got to be," Martine said, looking at him curiously. "You can't just give up, you know."

It was the same thing White had said, and it infuriated Dyson. They wouldn't see! He caught his breath for a sharp rebuttal, but what good would that do? None so blind, he thought, and remarked instead: "People don't change, sir. That's the trouble. People in general are—well, a bad lot, I'm afraid. They're bringing on the Blow-Up and no one can stop it. No matter what anybody does."

"Very likely," Martine said, bored. "Have another drink."

"Thanks, sir." Dyson leaned over and poured himself a second glass, wondering as he did so why he kept on calling the Chief sir . . . For the first time, he realized, it didn't matter whether or not he irritated Martine. The important point was to allow time to get the fuel hidden. After that, Martine would stop being an officer automatically. (Of course, there was the revolver in the desk. He mustn't go too far.)

"Where's White?" Martine asked. It was perfectly clear that he was bored. Maybe White would offer better entertainment.

"He's—resting," Dyson said wildly.

"Oh yes, energizing the robot for the take-off. I forgot. Well, now you've had your drink why don't you spell him? Maybe he'd like a drink, too."

DYSON KNEW he had to say something that would catch the Chief's interest—it didn't matter what—anything, anything. White *must* be left to do what he was doing until the job was accomplished. All doubt in his mind vanished as to whether White was actually operating the robot as he had promised. Dyson was suddenly confident about that. The only thing that mattered was to let him finish, to give him time, to keep Martine quiet.

"Sir," he said, "sir, I'd like your opinion. You've had experience. If I'm wrong I wish you'd tell me. Is it wrong to feel my generation's been cheated of its rights?"

Martine yawned. Then he leaned back to flip a switch, and a tape began to play *Lili Marlene* with infinitely saccharine emphasis.

"You think the world owes you a living, eh?" he asked unpleasantly.

"No, sir! Well—yes. Yes, a *living*, that's all. I want to stay alive. It isn't much to ask, is it? And the Blow-Up—"

"Dyson, you've got atomophobia. Just try to remember that when we get back to Earth you'll have a better perspective. I know the last six months haven't been a picnic, but we had a job to do. Now—"

"I've had perspective," Dyson said. "Ever since I was a kid. Sir, my father was Dr. Gerald Dyson."

Martine opened his eyes.

"Oh. So that's how you qualified for this trip. I wondered. You had the right technical training, of course, but—I wondered."

"Oh yes, I had training. My father insisted on that. He worked on one of the first bombs, you know. He was one of the men who said, 'Oops, sorry.' Afterward he got a mission in life—to find an atomic control. Of course, there isn't any. He'd just lighted a stick of dynamite and handed it over to me. Until I was old enough to stand up for my rights and say the devil with it. Parents always try to compensate for their failures through their children. But I've finally got clear away from Earth. For the first time in my life

I'm out from under the shadow of—" He paused, looked down at his glass, shuddered a little.

"The shadow of the cloud, sir. A big black cloud, spreading out. I was brought up with it. My father ran the films over and over, studying them. I dreamed about that cloud. It got bigger and bigger. My father could have handed me an Eden on Earth, with controlled atomic power. It could have been like a magic wand. It could make all work unnecessary. By rights a fellow like me, born in the Atomic Age, should never have any problems at all. Unlimited power's the answer to everything. But the only answer we're getting is the Blow-Up."

"I wish you'd quit saying that," Martine declared with sudden irritation. "You talk as if Earth had already gone up. It hasn't. Maybe it won't. There's a good chance we can still find a control. At least, we can go on trying."

"But don't you see, that kind of thinking is just a pep talk to the galley slaves?"

"If your precious Blow-Up ever does come," Martine said severely, "it'll come because people like you—" He paused and then shrugged. "Skip it," he said. "You've been under a strain, too. How about spelling White now at the robot and . . . no, wait a minute. I forgot." He regarded Dyson with distrustful memory showing on his face.

DYSON THOUGHT of the robot climbing down the crevasse and Martine blowing his top. He almost grinned. The Chief's paramount nightmare must be that something would happen to the robot. It had taken seven years in building and it was as integral a part of the ship as the fuel load. The fuel made up the muscles, but the robot was the brain that kept the complicated organism of the ship functioning in space. Dyson had thought first of disabling the robot, but he'd discarded the idea very soon. For one thing, he didn't know how. The robot had compensatory protective devices, the equivalent of an ego balancing its id. And anyhow, later on it would be useful.

When Eden was built on Mars the robot would furnish the perfect means of reducing details to a minimum. It could do almost anything. To Martine its primary

function was running the ship, and it was less expendable than the men, but Martine's feeling toward the robot had a touch of narcissism, Dyson thought. Probably every time Martine looked in a mirror he saw a synthesis of Martine and robot.

Later on, when the robot was made a hewer of wood and drawer of water—Dyson found himself suppressing a grin. Martine wouldn't like that at all. But he'd come around eventually. He could be bought, one way or another, just as Benjy White had been bought, with an intangible coinage.

Martine sat up, lifted his feet to the floor and groped with his toes for the discarded shoes.

"Guess I'll take White a little drink," he said.

The whiskey's spreading warmth had been relaxing all the tension in Dyson's body. Now suddenly every nerve twanged taut again and he heard without a sound the same vibrating chords like distant music which he had sensed in his skull when he wore the control helmet. Only this time the music was all discords. He had to stop Martine. He *had* to.

But Martine was on his feet now, stamping into his shoes, leaning to snap their catches. He tucked the bottle under his arm and picked up two clean glasses.

"Sir?"

"Well?"

"I—I'll take over, sir. I know how to handle the transmitter. Let me go. I'll send White in—"

Martine was at the door now. He simply shook his head briskly and went out, letting the door slam behind him.

Dyson looked at the clock, horrified to see how little time had passed, horrified to realize that in spite of all he had done this could still be happening. Surely, he had thought, at the last moment something would occur to him, some clever way to outwit Martine, *some* way to carry through the scheme that had so far worked so smoothly . . .

Martine's footsteps receded down the passage into silence. *Lili Marlene* crooned itself away in over-sweet harmonies toward a close while Dyson swung like a metronome toward the door and away from it, waiting in vain for some idea about what to do next. Finally *Lili Marlene* was left for good and all under the lamplight, and

Dyson discovered that he was opening Martine's desk with shaking hands.

But the revolver wasn't there any more.

So Martine would catch White while the robot was still at work hiding the fuel, and the ship would go back to Earth, and all Johnny Dyson's brave plans for a new world began to waver around the edges. Of course, he could run away, he could hide. They could go back without him, if they would—but in the long run he couldn't win. Sooner or later ships would come screaming down through the thin air above the scarlet plains, loaded with truant officers hunting Johnny Dyson . . .

* * *

He stopped on the threshold of the storage room. Benjy White was solving nothing by twisting his hands together in an agonized way above the spindle-legged control carriage. The robot-cradle, of course, was empty. Martine wore the transmitter helmet, and by the look on his face Dyson knew the robot's activation directions were coming in clear and strong. Martine knew everything.

His eyes met Dyson's.

Dyson turned and ran.

A DOLL-SIZED JOHNNY DYSON ran across the contours of a doll-sized chart away from a doll-sized vinylite spaceship. He didn't dare look up because in the sky the face of a gigantic Johnny Dyson might be looking down at him. Time had slipped back fifteen minutes and he had fallen into the microcosm, and somewhere up there, enormous in an inconceivably vast spaceship, the whole scene was playing itself over again, from the moment Martine's voice had snapped an order-to-report into the inter-com.

The vast, invisible finger of giant Johnny Dyson, fifteen-minutes-ago-Johnny-Dyson, had traced his trail in advance. He knew where to run. He knew the route the robot would have followed. But the time-factor was unknown.

The fuel might already be stored in the cache and camouflaged. Even if it had, still he had failed. For White hadn't erased the robot's memory track and Martine could follow every step of the way through the path of the metal mind.

Martine was running behind him now. So was White, he thought. But he didn't look back. He was running from more than Martine, more than men. He ran from the power and tyranny of a suicidal and homicidal Earth. Under his feet the ground rang hollow, as though his subterranean palace were already built, and waited, a hollow Eden, for its inheritor.

Then on the hillside ahead he saw a flicker of moonlight on metal and in the grey pallor of the night the robot came ponderously into his range of vision, toiling mindlessly under its fuel load toward the cave.

A shout sounded behind him, ringing thinly in the cold air. Glancing back, Dyson saw the dwarfed figures still running behind him. The ship looked doll-sized beyond. Illusion persisted. Everything had gone small. Ahead of the minimized White came marionette Martine, the transmitter gleaming on his head, while he guided a puppet's puppet, the control box, at a grotesque rocking run across the plain. All of them, pursuers and pursued, moved with the nightmare slowness and lightness that Martian gravity induces.

Dyson's head start—for he had plunged headlong out of the ship, and the others had lost time searching for him in the corridors—was a totally useless thing. He knew it. But he could not yet give up the faint hope that somehow, somehow, a way would be revealed to him at the last crucial moment.

There was a white flash in the dark, and the thin report of a revolver behind him. Probably it was a warning only, for he heard no whine of a bullet going by. He looked up, meeting the crooked gaze of the two moons like two uneven eyes—eyes in the face of giant Johnny Dyson. The sky around him was filled with conflict. Orion's club was lifted, Taurus' horns were lowered, Andromeda struggled in her chains, Sirius was a bared and gleaming fang. And bright among them hung a blue-green planet—blue for purity, green for peace . . .

Dyson's vision telescoped through a dizzy spiral, down diminishing vortices of time and space. At the end was the blue-green world and ten-years-ago Johnny Dyson, fifteen-years-ago Johnny Dyson, quite ignorant and quite safe. The world

was his parents' responsibility in those golden days. Not his. Oh youth, youth, lovely and lost and safe.

Martine fired again.

Here-and-now Johnny Dyson ran on toward the robot, which was in the act of vanishing into the dark mouth of the cave. The cave was only an ant-burrow and the robot was a shining pale ant with a grain of sand clutched in its mandibles. Spatial dimensions had lost all importance along with the rest of the natural laws. Only in dreams did you seem to float like this when you leaped, running as if through glue from pursuing dangers.

Directly ahead was a pile of shielded canisters, damper-hooks in place. Dyson slowed to study them, trying confusedly to estimate how many foot-pounds or tons of lifting pressure they represented. Not enough to lift the ship. There were only eight. If the robot had hidden all the rest, then Mars' apron-strings would still be strong enough to tie the ship down forever. If—if . . . of course! If the rest were in the cave, and if he could get there first, then the answer was childishly easy. How could he have missed it? Exultation boiled up in him, filling his throat with triumph.

He heard his name shouted, and he sprinted, bending low at each jump so the thrust of his toe would carry him forward and not up against the easy gravity of Mars.

HE REACHED THE CAVE MOUTH just as the robot's emerging thorax caught light from the rolling moons. It did not pause, but its false pupils examined him, the radioatomic brain analyzed him as a mobile obstacle, and the great worker-ant walked straight ahead. Dyson got out of the way. The worker-ant moved majestically downhill toward the remaining fuel-canisters.

Dyson paused at the cave mouth, peering in. It was so dark in there. He hesitated for a moment, knowing the solution to his problem was waiting for him in the dark, but feeling a curious reluctance to enter that black enclosure.

He glanced back. Martine and White were much closer, running silently, and the robot was moving down the slope toward them ahead of its twin shadows. There

were more shadows than men moving toward him up the hill, twice as many shadows, in twinned pairs, one black and one gray on the purple mosses. Deimos and Phobos spun through the emptiness overhead, pale silver shaping the ghosts of all moving things behind them on the ground. But it was Phobos that guided them. Phobos, who is Fear.

Dyson turned his back on them. They were still far enough away to look tiny. He could reach across the vinylite map and take the control box away from Martine between his thumb and finger . . .

Instead he took out a pocket fluorescent and shook it alight. With an uncomfortable feeling that he was somehow violating a sanctuary, he stepped into the cave. There were the canisters, row upon row against the rocky wall.

This was the mouth of Eden. He had chosen this site for his underground palace, hidden safely away in case after all rescue ships did come from Earth. But he hadn't really expected rescue ships. The spreading cloud of his childhood had gradually swelled until Earth was scarcely visible to him any more. It was a shadow cast before the flash of the Blow-Up.

Working quickly, with both hands, he stripped the damper-hooks from the canisters . . .

A few minutes afterward he ran out of the cave and down the slope toward the approaching men with their escort of nervous shadows. His shout broke on a high-pitched note of triumph.

"Walk right in!" he cried across the plain. "It's all there, Martine! It's all in the cave! Go and get it!"

Then the thunders began.

THERE WASN'T any real danger. Not as long as they stayed out of the cave. The fuel was blowing off canister by canister, not all at once, because each was a unit and constructed with every safety precaution mankind knew how to apply. Each one had a half-life of sixty-five seconds. They weren't blowing all at once because Dyson hadn't activated them all at once. He had only two hands.

One canister blew. Eight seconds later another one blew. The power that should have lifted a spaceship was going into light and sound and radiation too subtle to look

dangerous. A man could walk into the cave and right up to the canisters, if he wanted. And he could walk out again.

What would happen to his cells, his marrow, his blood and bones, later, was another matter. Radium can be leached from the human body. But the invisible poisons in the cave couldn't be, ever. Gamma radiation leprosy, quite incurable, was pouring out of the canisters into the alternate white glare and blind darkness of the cave.

Before that threat human conflicts altered.

But not quite instantly. There was a brief, stunned interval in which Martine struggled with the readjustment of his own mind, changing rage over into terror, triumph into the awareness of defeat.

He pointed his revolver.

"Go back in," he said. "Turn it off."

"No," Dyson said.

"I'll count three."

"I'd rather be dead."

Martine hesitated a moment. Then, "White," he said.

White was staring at the bright mouth of the cave. It blinked and went dark. He licked his lips.

"No, sir," he said.

"Go in yourself," Dyson said to Martine, grinning, seeing the older man's face lighted again by the renewed glare from the cave. He waited until the thunder ceased briefly to vibrate, and said, "It's easy, you know. Just push the dampers in again. Either way, you lose. Stay where you are and you're washed up as a commander. Or go in the cave. You'll get back to Earth with the cargo and maybe you'll wear more stars on your shoulders—only you won't have any shoulders."

"Shut up," Martine said crisply.

The thunders rolled.

Martine drew a noisy breath and yanked the control-carriage toward him. It came on its spindling legs, like a dog. He turned a dial. There was a clank of metal on rock and the robot moved slowly into sight toward them. He had cancelled its commands, then, and Dyson's orders were erased from its mind. But too late. Much too late.

Now it began to move mindlessly toward the cave.

"Fine," Dyson jeered. "That's the way

to save the fuel, all right. It'll ruin the robot, of course, so it can't pilot the ship. But what of it? Mars is a nice place to live!"

Martine began to curse him.

"Oh shut up," Dyson said. "You're through. So's Earth. When the Blow-Up comes, we'll be out of it right here in our Ark, watching the Deluge from a nice safe distance."

The thunders rolled.

Martine made his mistake. He fell back on argument. His voice was still firm, but what he said was, "Earth needs our cargo—"

Dyson took a long chance and swung his arm. The revolver sailed out of Martine's grip and thudded softly on the moss at Benjy White's feet. That meant Martine's finger hadn't been inside the guard, on the trigger. And that meant many things . . .

"Our cargo?" Dyson echoed, poised on his toes and watching Martine intently, ready to forestall the slightest move toward the revolver. He wanted to pick it up himself, but that would instantly change the plane of conflict from moral to physical, and on the moral plane he knew he was already the winner.

Why didn't White pick it up? Why had White come along, anyhow? Whose side was he on? Probably he didn't know himself. Dyson grimaced angrily at him. But he kept on talking:

"We haven't got the cure for the Blow-Up in our cargo, Martine. There isn't any cure. And for one reason—just one. That's people. Men and women. They're no good, Martine. So they're going to die. All of them." He nodded toward the roaring cave. "This is the way the world ends," he said.

MARTINE LOOKED UP the slope, listened to the thunder. He didn't move. He had nothing to say. Watching him, Dyson realized that he didn't care whether White picked up the gun or not. He had won without guns.

"All right, Martine," he said, almost casually. "Let's have the helmet. You won't be needing the transmitter any more."

There was a pause. The thunders rolled. Dyson glanced at White, who was staring at the pale eye of the cave. Dyson stooped

swiftly and picked up the gun.

"Johnny."

It was White, still looking as if hypnotized into the cave-eye.

"Well?"

"Listen."

The thunders rolled.

"I hear it," Dyson said. Martine neither moved nor spoke.

"Pint-sized Blow-Up," White said. "The real one would be a lot worse. Noisier. Somehow I never thought of that before. The noise."

"We won't hear it."

"We'd see it, though. I'd see it. I'd know." He wrenched his gaze away from the glare of the cavern and looked up into the dark, toward the blue-green star of Earth. "Poochie," he said slowly, "was always afraid of thunder."

Dyson felt the bottom of his stomach drop out. He didn't know why yet, not with his mind. But there was some danger approaching that had taken the lead away from him, out of his control. It was coming closer and closer, with every word White spoke and every slow thought that took shape in his brain.

"I told you about Poochie," White said. "She used to be my wife, once. And the only thing that ever scared her was thunder. Used to hang on to me when—"

The thunders rolled.

"Benjy," Dyson said, his mouth dry. "Benjy—"

"So I'm crazy," White said. "Can't help what you think, kid. I never thought the Blow-Up would sound like this. I think I ought to be around where Poochie could find me, if she wanted, in case the Blow-Up comes."

He started up the slope toward the cave. "Benjy!" Dyson said. His voice trembled. "You'd be dead in six months. And what good would it do? Our cargo can't stop the Blow-Up."

"How do you know?" White asked over his shoulder. "It's not for us to say. Our job wasn't to stop the Blow-Up. It was to get some Martian ores back home. A man ought to do his job if he takes the pay for it."

"Benjy! Don't move! I tell you, you can't stop the Blow-Up!"

"I sure as hell can stop this one," White said, and went on up the slope.

"Benjy, if you take another step I'll shoot!"

White glanced over his shoulder.

"No you won't, Johnny," he said. "No, you won't."

Dyson tried to squeeze the trigger.

He couldn't.

He concentrated on White's silhouetted back and sighted along the revolver, and he forced a command down his arm, into his index finger. But the message never got through. Martine moved faster.

MARTINE took the long, quick forward step and slammed the edge of his palm down on Dyson's wrist. The gun exploded in mid-air as it spun away.

The thunders rolled.

"Benjy!" Dyson shouted. It came out a thin whisper. He had to stop Benjy. He had to. Benjy mustn't go into that cave. It was very, very wrong, somehow, for anyone but Johnny Dyson to go into that cave. He took a step forward, but Martine, revolver ready, blocked his path. Martine, the truant officer, ready to collar him and drag him back to Earth. Back to work, discipline, responsibility.

Work. Discipline. Responsibility—

"Oh, no, no!" Johnny Dyson whispered. In his mind's eye he saw his fragile Martian Eden glisten under the moons, all its palaces and shining towers beginning to dissolve around him.

A Geiger began to tick in his brain.

It ticked faster and louder.

It roared.

Then he felt the flash. He felt the top of his head open and the bursting nova explode and the ballooning black cloud spurt upward through the sutures of his skull. The cloud rolled out enormously, its edges curling over and under in the familiar, the terrible shape of doom. He looked up to see it . . .

He saw the Earth-star, blue-green against the dark. He saw it change. *He saw it change . . .*

The explosion in his head must have been only a faint and remote echo, he thought, of that other and larger and farther nova-burst. For an instant half the sky was blotted out in the white glare of exploding Earth. He saw it happen.

Then the glare receded and condensed. The Earth-star took shape again, no longer

blue for purity and green for peace, but a dreadful, shaking, unstable glow.

This is the way the world ends . . .

Not with a bang, but a whimper.

He heard himself laughing.

He stumbled up the slope after White.

"Benjy!" he yelled. "Benjy, wait! It's happened! Didn't you hear? Look up—*it's happened!*"

White slogged on, not turning. Dyson labored after him, seized his shoulder. White paused and looked uncertainly into his face. Dyson couldn't stay still. He couldn't stop laughing. He danced—the old, old dance of triumph. When Martine reached the spot he danced around Martine too.

"What's happened?" Martine shouted at him.

"The end of the world!" Dyson shrielled.

"This is the way, all right. You *must* have heard it! Earth's gone. We're safe. Safe in Eden. Look up, you dopes, look up!"

Two of the men looked up, while the third danced. Danced and laughed. Johnny couldn't stop laughing, even when Martine and White lowered their gaze and stared at him.

"Dyson," Martine said in a curious, low voice. "Dyson. Listen. Nothing's happened. You must have—imagined it. Look up, see for yourself."

Johnny looked. It was still there, all right. A trembling white glare in the sky. He laughed more shrilly than ever.

"But Dyson—" Martine said. White shook his head at him, reached out and took Johnny by the arm, stopping his dance.

"It's all right, Johnny," he said. "You're safe now. Everything's fine. Now you just take it easy and wait for me. I'll be back in a little while." He whispered something to Martine. Then he started up the slope again, toward the cave.

Johnny stared after him.

"Benjy!"

There was no answer.

"Benjy, what's the matter with you? You don't need to save the fuel now. Earth's gone. We're safe. We don't have to go back. Don't you understand—"

"Easy," Martine said. "It's all right."

White went on slowly up the hill, his shoulders hunched as if against a wind that was not blowing. He was getting smaller

and smaller, vanishing into the microcosm. Johnny Dyson blinked into the white eye of the cave. Then the rolling thunders swallowed Benjy.

AFTER A WHILE THEY were in the ship again, ready for the take-off. And, after that, Martine and White talked as if they had actually left Mars, headed back toward—well, not Earth, because obviously there was no Earth. Where, then?

Johnny tried to figure it out. When he asked questions the answers he got were so irrational that he had to translate them into his own terms; but presently he found a solution that satisfied him. When they said "Earth" they meant it only as a symbol. They were, logically enough, going to try to locate another habitable planet somewhere, a planet even better than Mars, where they could rebuild Eden.

And that was all right too. Because, after thinking it over, Johnny realized that it would have taken a lot of hard work to build his Martian Eden, even with the robot to help. It would have been quite a responsibility.

It was better to let the older men have the responsibility.

Of course the Blow-Up must have been quite a shock to Martine and White. It was difficult for them to readjust. But it did no harm to let them pretend. The name didn't matter. They thought of the new, undiscovered planet as Earth. When they found it they might even call it Earth—New Earth, in memory of the bad Old Earth that was gone. Gone forever, with all its worthless, evil infestations of humanity. For that Johnny couldn't really feel regret.

He made allowances for his companions, even when they acted a little crazy. It was odd, being the only completely sane man in the ship.

He waited. There was a period of vivid, confusing dreams in which he almost imagined himself back on Earth, but presently the dreams passed and were gone. Then he was able to sleep soundly again.

. . . Johnny's spaceship kept on going. Sometimes he wondered when it would reach its destination. He was tired of the artificial days and nights of the ship, and those viziports with their disturbingly vivid images of what no longer existed. It had been pointless, after all, trying to disguise the blackness of space with those visions of Old Earth outside the windows. And it had been rather foolish to disguise the robot so that it looked like a man in white when it came in to bring him food and get its orders from him.

Someday when he felt more like it, he would change the orders and remake the robot, casting it back into its metal reality. But he was tired. He had to rest. He mustn't take on any unnecessary responsibilities now, because the day was coming when the ship would land on a habitable planet and his work would begin.

And he'd do his *job*. He'd do it well. He hadn't given up. Oh no, not Johnny Dyson.

His own father had lain down on the job, of course, first trying to pass the buck to Johnny, and then, when that failed, simply by going insane. A complete refusal to accept responsibility. Yes, that was the only sin—giving up. For if his father had stayed on the job, he might have found an answer. After all, Dr. Gerald Dyson had been a brilliant man.

But Dr. Gerald Dyson had given up. He had ended his career in an insane asylum, very likely so happy in his ultimate retreat that he'd never even known it when the Blow-Up came.

If I'd had my father's chances, I'd have kept on fighting to the last ditch, Johnny thought. But I've got my own job. It isn't too late. And if the ship ever reaches a habitable world, I'll start right in working at it.

He glanced at the viziport images of a world that had given up and therefore had died, quickly and painlessly.

Johnny smiled.

He was so happy in his spaceship room that he never knew it when the real Blow-Up came.

MEEM

A Short Story by MARGARET ST. CLAIR

The fog-shrouded marshlands of Vaudria seethed with man-hunt . . . and Duncan, with his stolen secret, sought refuge in the Earth-Ship GORGO. Safe behind steel . . . until, faraway, a strange Lorelei shaped its song . . .

THIS TIME LAST YEAR DUNCAN had been junior commissioner for protocol at the Terrestrial Embassy. Discreet, hard working, popular with his male and female colleagues alike, the future had seemed to hold nothing for him but a series of comfortably merited advancements to full consular rank. Now he crouched under the bridge in the chilly dankness of the Vaudrian night, holding on to the upright and shivering uncontrollably, while he prayed, prayed to everything in his nebulous pantheon, that the Vaudrian patrol wouldn't find him. It wouldn't be so bad if they merely shot him, but he doubted they would let it go at that.

The meem, snuggled warmly under his jacket, stirred lethargically. He could feel the tiny ticking of its thoughts going past his. "Safe," they ran, "safe? So tired. Safe on Earth."

Duncan grinned lopsidedly. Safe? Not by a damn sight! He wouldn't be safe until he was on board the *S. S. Gorgo*, if then. From the respected member of a respected profession he had turned, degree by degree, into a hunted man. He was a human explosive, the potential disseminator of a biological scandal of major size. If he ever got back to earth, what he had to tell would rip the heavy fabric of terrestrial-Vaudrian relations from bottom to top. And yet it had happened so imperceptibly!

The conversation with Nickerson that afternoon last year had been the starting point. The Embassy staff had been clustered on the roof of the Embassy building, watching excitedly, through binoculars, opera glasses, and a variety of optical aids, the Vaudrian throngs streaming into the already-packed great circle that marked the city's heart. The influx had ceased only when it was physically impossible for another Vaudrian to push his way into it. There had been a second of tense silence, when the huge crowd was utterly still. And then, thrillingly audible through the calm air, a single high note had poured out of nearly a million Vaudrian throats.

The people on the roof of the Embassy building had leaned forward intently. Nickerson, standing beside Duncan, had jogged his shoulder to be sure he was watching. Slowly the doors of the circular temple on the edge of the great circle had parted. The temple statue, visible on this day only, was revealed.

Duncan had seen it clearly; it was quite as impressive as people said. The group represented two persons, a seated man and a girl-child. The man's left hand was resting lightly and tenderly on the shoulder of the girl who stood between his knees. His other hand pointed past the girl's head into the distance, and the girl's rapt, dreaming gaze followed it. The inner



The weird lights drew nearer in the fog . . . the Vaudrian patrol was ringing him in!

meaning of fatherhood—loving, uplifting, fostering—had never been more beautifully expressed.

A SHUDDERING long-drawn *Oh* had gone up from the Vaudrians. Then the doors of the temple had begun to close again. Duncan had time to observe that the group was made of some frosty silver metal and that the object at the feet of the father was probably a meem, the universal Vaudrian pet. Then the temple doors had gone to, not to open for another year, and the silent crowd began to disperse. Tomorrow was Father's Day, but it would be observed without ceremonial, within the quiet confines of millions of Vaudrian homes.

Duncan had begun to put his field glasses away. "By the Father and the Daughter," he quoted from the Vaudrian ritual to Nickerson; "I'm glad I saw it. It was impressive and beautiful, worth waiting a year for."

"Yes . . ." Nickerson had fidgeted with the straps of his binoculars. The rest of the Embassy staff was going down the escalator, chattering in subdued tones, but Nickerson seemed to want to linger on the roof and talk. Since he was Duncan's superior, Duncan waited respectfully for him to speak. Nickerson had cleared his throat and leaned toward him. "Did you know . . . that they're not mammals, my boy?"

Duncan had been taken aback. The point had never occurred to him. Like most Terrestrials, he had found the Vaudrians unsympathetic except where their father-daughter cult was concerned, but he had never questioned their basic likeness to himself.

"But . . . they're warm-blooded and they suckle their young," he said after a moment. "They look like us, except for their greater height and their bluish pigmentation."

"There's more to being a mammal than warm blood and suckling," Nickerson had said. "Besides, did you ever notice that they don't suckle their children when they're very young?"

(How much had Nickerson surmised or guessed? Duncan wondered. He shifted his numb fingers on the clammy wood of the bridge and tried not to cough. Everything?

No, the remark about the suckling must have been no more than a coincidence.)

Nickerson had pulled at his sandy moustache for a moment. "Of course you understand this is in *strict* confidence, my boy," he had said. Duncan had smelled the heavy sweetness of phlomis on his breath. "One of the chaps at the Embassy here whose hobby was biology told me a few things he'd found out about them." He had hesitated; and if he had stopped there (Duncan thought, listening to the cold lapping of the water under the bridge), everything would have been all right. Duncan would have been sitting in front of one of the Embassy fires now, sipping a nightcap of champagne and thinking that it was about time for bed. But Nickerson had gone on, he had gone on and ruined everything.

"They reproduce by parthenogenesis," he had said. Duncan could feel now, as vividly as if it had been yesterday, the shock the slow words had given him. "Inokeye assured me it was by parthenogenesis."

"But—but—" Duncan had stammered. He had stared blankly at Nickerson, expecting a hint that the older man was making a joke. "That's impossible! What about their cult of fatherhood?"

Nickerson had shrugged for answer.

"But—" Duncan had repeated. "But I always understood that in parthenogenesis no males were born."

NICKERSON had looked all around him before answering and then, though there was no one on the roof except themselves, had lowered his voice.

"You really must keep this to yourself, Duncan," he had said warningly. "Terrestrial industry—I don't think it's altogether a good thing—has become so dependent upon large-scale imports of benite from Vaudria that we can't risk offending them. Vaudrian touchiness in these matters is really remarkable. Did you know that no Terrestrial has ever seen, been allowed to see, I mean, a Vaudrian text on biology? —But Inokeye thought the answer to your point about males being born might lie in the fact that they aren't *functional* males."

"You mean there's no mating?"

"There not only isn't, there couldn't possibly be." And Nickerson had gone into anatomical details. He had finished with a

further warning to Duncan to keep what he had learned strictly to himself.

Nobody could possibly have heard the conversation. Duncan and Nickerson had been alone on the roof, in the open air. But next week Nickerson had been unexpectedly transferred to Mars—kicked upstairs, as Embassy scuttlebutt had it—and Duncan had begun to notice a certain thickening in the atmosphere that surrounded him personally. He had laughed at himself for his suspicions, but he had set traps. As a result of the trap-setting, he had found that his papers were being searched regularly twice each week.

His colleagues in the Embassy were not quite so friendly as they had been. Toby, Nickerson's successor, called Duncan in for a long, pointless interview, in the course of which he expressed admiration for the Vaudrian Father-Daughter cult and pleasure that it was being extended to Earth. Duncan had perceived that he was being tested, that his loyalty was being checked. But loyalty to what? To whom?

Even then it might have died down gradually, except for the lettergram from Nickerson and Duncan's friendship with Jrar. Jrar was a young Vaudrian chemist who had come to the Embassy to try to arrange for the importation of some special terrestrial chemical apparatus he wanted. Duncan had helped him with the papers and discovered a tepid liking for him. They had lunched together once or twice.

Jrar had been somewhat less reticent than most Vaudrians. Duncan had learned that he was twenty-two, that he wasn't married yet (highly unusual for a Vaudrian), that though he had good prospects he wasn't altogether satisfied with them.

It was toward the end of the second lunch date that the significant thing (Duncan realized it now) had been said. Jrar had been holding the restaurant's meem on his knees, stroking its thick blackish fur absently, and Duncan had said something or other about wondering why meems were so universally popular. They were, he thought, too sluggish and unresponsive to make good pets. Jrar had looked at him for a moment and then, in a voice unlike his usual one, had said, "Did you ever notice, Duncan, how the meems disappear after Father's Day?"

That had been all. Jrar had changed the subject quickly after that.

DUNCAN SHIFTED his position, trying to ease his cramped limbs. His hands were so cold that he was afraid he might lose his grip and fall. He leaned forward abruptly, apprehension waking in him. Had he seen, about half a mile off through the light mist, a spot of light that seemed to waver and slowly expand? That would be the patrol, and if it was, he'd have to get out. Where could he go? His rendezvous with the *Gorgo's* third mate wasn't due for another two hours. He'd wait a little, wait and hope and keep his fingers crossed.

The friendship with Jrar would have stopped anyway. The two men had not enough in common to keep their interest up. But the next day Toby had called Duncan into his office and told him sternly that, as Duncan must already know, friendships between Vaudrians and Terrestrials were not encouraged. There had been complaints about his seeing Jrar from a Vaudrian high-up. Duncan must drop the acquaintanceship.

Duncan had listened and agreed, fuming inwardly. He had been too angry to defend himself. He'd gone back to his room and read the lettergram from Nickerson again, more and more puzzled by it. It seemed on the surface to be merely a friendly letter, full of personal news and trivialities. But it didn't sound quite like Nickerson, and after a good many hours Duncan had succeeded in decoding it. Nickerson advised him urgently to make contact with the *S. S. Gorgo's* third mate. The *Gorgo* wasn't due in port for a month yet. Next week the Vaudrian newscaster had announced, among other items, that the body of a young Vaudrian chemist, a man named 803 Jrar, had been found in an abandoned house.

Duncan was tall enough to pass for Vaudrian, and the blue pigment could be simulated. He decided to try to pick up Jrar's trail.

He had been very, very careful. He had, on the whole, had considerable success. He had found, as he thought, that Jrar had been murdered. And he had found—

It was the patrol. He would have to leave the bridge immediately. The spot of

light had been much nearer this time. That meant that they were "ringing" the area where he was, piece by piece.

Duncan began to work his way toward land, jumping from trestle to trestle of the bridge. Once he missed his footing on the slippery rounds and nearly went into the deep, icy stream. His alarm must have registered in the meem's little mind, for he could feel the instant patter of its thoughts. "Be careful, Duncan. Not safe. Get to Earth. Be safe."

HE STOOD hesitating when he had reached the shore. Where could he go? In his dirty, exhausted condition, the disguising pigment gone, the first Vaudrian who saw him would call the patrol. He'd try the *Gorgo*, on the chance that the third mate might be around somewhere.

His physical activity seemed to have aroused the meem from its lethargy. Its thoughts were coming in a thick stream now. Occasionally Duncan answered them. Discovering that meems were telepathic and how to contact them had been one of his most valuable achievements in the period during which he had been following Jrar. The discovery had enabled him to pick out a meem which was discontented and afraid and hence would cooperate.

The *Gorgo* was a long way off, and though Duncan tried to hurry, the days of exposure and strain had told on him. Once he looked back and saw the expanding ring of light near where he had been on the bridge. An involuntary quiver passed over him. What would have happened to him if the patrol had caught him? What happened to the meems, probably. It was characteristic of Vaudrian psychology to make the punishment fit the crime.

Finding out about the meems had been pure accident. Duncan had been sitting in a third-rate bar, drinking the licorice-flavored pap that passed for intoxicating liquor on Vaudria. The bar hostess had stepped out to get change for the bill he had given her. And then her baby, in the room behind the ill-lit bar, had begun to cry.

Duncan had hesitated. But the baby had kept on crying, louder and louder, until finally Duncan, in his role of Vaudrian male, had stepped into the back to try to comfort it. He'd jounced the crib up

and down several times—it was suspended on springs from the ceiling—and when the infant kept on screaming had put out his hand uncertainly toward its cheek.

The baby was very young, less than a month. But it had turned its head toward Duncan's fingers with uncanny rapidity. And while he had still been wondering at the movement, it had licked fiercely at his hand.

Duncan had let out an amazed cry. The child's tongue had been as hard and rough as a file. His wrist was smarting and stinging where it had rasped the flesh from it.

Then the outer door had banged and the bar hostess had come running in, all apologies for the accident. (Fortunately she hadn't seen the color of the blood oozing from Duncan's wrist.) She had picked up the child and soothed it expertly, and when it hushed had said, as if in explanation, "His meem died too soon. He misses it."

Duncan had had another drink and left. That night he had stolen the meem.

HE COULD SEE the *Gorgo* now through the thin mist, a mile-high bulk. The ship was loading cargo. He could hear the whine of the winches and see the aureoles of its sodium lights through the haze. Ingots of benite were moving steadily into the ship's dozen holds. In the confused activity of loading, he might be able to get close and look for Picket, the third mate.

An instant later Duncan felt despair invade him. Twenty or so Vaudrian soldiers were standing about the open holds, as if they were on guard. Their officer (an elderly woman, as always) was talking to the *Gorgo's* second mate.

Had the message from Nickerson been detected? If so, the soldiers were on the lookout for him, Duncan, and Picket must be already under arrest. Duncan came closer, thankful for the cover given by the mist, and listened intently.

What he heard reassured him. The Vaudrian officer's high voice carried well; she and the mate were discussing smuggling and he was assuring her that the Vaudrian government would have the full cooperation of the *Gorgo's* personnel in

seeing that nothing went in or out of the ship illicitly.

The message, then, hadn't been discovered, and Picket was still at large. But what was Duncan to do? He looked behind him and saw, with painful apprehension, that the expanding lights of the "ringing" process were getting close again.

The meem stirred beneath his jacket. "Rope," its thoughts came; "Duncan, climb little rope."

Duncan looked about, wondering what the creature meant. (It was apparently somewhat clairvoyant, as well as telepathic, since it couldn't see from its hiding place.) After a moment, he located the rope. It was a slender electrical cable to one side in the shadow. It went up to a ring that was near an open hatch. The cable was used, Duncan knew, for grounding the huge charge of static electricity the *Gorgo* had picked up in space. He tested the cable, and it was solidly tied. He only hoped the insulation was sound on it.

He waited an instant, taking deep breaths. Then he caught hold of the cable and began to haul himself up on it, hand over hand.

He was wickedly tired. His weight wrenched at his shoulder sockets, and his muscles felt soft and hot. The cable was slack, and that increased the difficulty of his climb. The fog thickened as he went up.

He was two thirds of the way to the ring, fifty or sixty feet from the ground, when there came a burst of shouts at him from below. A light shone up dimly through the fog; somebody had seen him. A second later there came the long roll of a stun gun.

The meem was frightened; its thoughts went screaming past Duncan in almost vocal hysteria. The stun gun trilled again. Duncan bit his lip until he tasted blood. Then he let himself slide down the cable about ten feet, and, with a precise coordination of which he never would have believed himself capable, used the momentum thus imparted to swing in at an open port-hole below him and to the right.

He almost missed it. He caught the edge of the frame with his fingernails, and clawed his way over it; then he was in a softly-carpeted corridor and running down

it desperately.

He made two turns before he found a stateroom whose door had been left ajar. He darted in, barred the door, and collapsed against it. His whole body was shaking with his heart's desperate thuds.

He wasn't safe. They knew he was on the ship, and they'd search the ship for him. He might be able to hide for a while, but sooner or later he'd be found. He'd exchanged the frying pan for a pot of similar temperature.

He couldn't go any further. He'd have to rest. He sank down on the padded bunk, so tired that he hardly cared if he was caught.

The meem poked its flat head out. Its dull eyes looked at him. "The man, the man you want. Near here," came the patter of its thoughts.

"How do you know?" Duncan asked aloud.

"He is thinking of you."

DUNCAN LOOKED at the meem for a moment. It had lain down again, as if exhausted by its recent activity.

"Where is he?" Duncan asked.

"To your right."

Duncan scrubbed his face hastily with the end of a damp towel—he might meet someone in the corridor—and smoothed his hair. His image in the mirror was still desperate and hollow-eyed. He stepped into the corridor.

He found Picket leaning up against one of the bulkheads, his hands in his pockets, whistling idly. The stripes on his blue sleeves identified him clearly enough. Duncan softly gave him the countersign.

"You're not mixed up in anything—unh—serious, are you?" Picket asked when the two men had gone back to the cabin. His sleepy, good-natured face wore a disconcerted look. It was clear that Duncan's unexpected arrival and hunted, harried appearance had discomposed him.

Duncan hesitated. He was too tired to think. He decided on the exact truth. "I stole this," he said, indicating the limp form of the meem. "Taking them from Vaudria is forbidden by interplanetary agreement. But they would have killed it if I'd left it here."

Picket's face cleared a little but re-

mained dubious. He jingled the keys in his pockets uncertainly and frowned at the meem. "I guess it'll be all right," he said at last. "Old Nickerson did me a good turn once, and I'd like to pay it back. He said you were in some sort of mess with the Vaudrians."

"Are they searching the ship?" Duncan asked.

Picket looked surprised. "Why, no," he said. He halted and grinned boyishly. "You and old Nick seem to have Vaudria on the brain. The last time I saw him, all he could talk about was how Vaudrian trade was getting too important to earth. I haven't cared much for the Vaudrians I've met, but they're not sinister. Nickerson's wrong about that. They're just like anybody else."

Duncan bit his lip and made no reply. Was this the attitude he'd have to buck when he got back to earth? Business as usual and no slanders, please, on the Vaudrians? But he had the meem, and examination by a biologist would show that what he had to say was true. He could convince them, he knew he could.

"You look worn out, old timer," Picket said sympathetically. "Lie down and rest, and I'll go see the purser and have him put you on the passenger list. I'll fix it up with him about your passport, too." He cleared his throat. "I don't know why you stole that thing, and I'm not going to ask. But the Vaudrians won't get you now. We're jetting for Terra tomorrow at 16. You're safe here."

Where else was there to go, what else could he do?

"I hope so," Duncan said.

IN THE OFFICE of the Vaudrian overseer of police, a kilometer or so from the space port, 429 Bood was remonstrating respectfully with his immediate superior.

"Would it not be well to take them now, my lady? They must not escape. We know they are on the ship. We could apply to the captain for license to search the ship."

88 Etath smiled at him indulgently. "And if he refuses it?" she said. "That would be unpleasant. It is better this way, Bood." She put her lean bluish fingers together. "Are you forgetting what day tomorrow

is?"

"Oh," said 429 Bood.

"There will be no trouble, no unpleasantness. It will happen quietly. He is bound to be affected. I have seen it before with men from Earth."

"Oh," said Bood once more.

"Bring your wife with you when you report for duty tomorrow," said 88 Etath, dismissing him. "And see that the men under you bring theirs."

* * *

Duncan was roused from apprehensive reveries next morning by Picket's discreet rap on the cabin door. Picket had brought breakfast and, in a musette bag, a change of clothing. There was a worried expression on his pleasant face.

"When you've finished, I think you'd better get out of here," he said to Duncan as he ate. "I brought one of my old suits for you."

Duncan pressed one hand to the back of his neck. "Is—are the Vaudrians searching the ship?"

"No, it's just Vaudrian sightseers. Mainly women, and only one or two of the men are armed. The old man gave them permission to go over the ship."

"But we're not taking on passengers until twelve, and they might wonder about you if they saw you. I think you'd better change into my old clothes and go up to the chart room with me. If they see you there, they'll think you're an officer. What about that thing, though?" Picket indicated the meem, which, as inert as a feather stole, was lying on the edge of the bunk. "What can we do with it?"

Duncan pressed his hand once more to the base of his skull. The meem's eyes were open, so he knew it was not asleep, but he could no longer make contact with its thoughts. "It can hide under my tunic. I've carried it that way all along."

Picket's face relaxed a little. "Can it be trusted to keep still, though? You said stealing it was forbidden by interplanetary agreement. You might get into a mess if it gave you away."

"It'll be quiet," Duncan said abstractedly. "It wants to get to Earth just as much as I do. It would be killed if it stayed here." He stood up, staggering a little. He had to catch at the bracket above his head to get his balance back.

Picket looked at him in quick alarm. "What's the matter?" he said. "Are you sick?"

"I've got a splitting headache, that's all. I might be a little feverish."

"Oh. You'll feel better when we're in space, I guess."

DUNCAN began to change into Picket's uniform. There was, as he had foreseen, room enough for the meem inside the tunic. He picked the animal up and arranged it against his chest. As if the movement had disturbed it, the sluggish current of its thoughts began flowing again ("Safe? Safe? So *far* to earth."), and it cooperated with him lethargically.

"Now, where do we go?" Duncan asked when he had finished. For a moment he pressed both hands tightly to his head. "Lord, how my head hurts. I took two tablets from the aid chest when I woke up, but they didn't help. I don't feel quite myself."

Picket looked at him but made no comment. He led Duncan out into the corridor and turned to the left. A hundred steps further, and they turned to the left again.

"The chart room's on the next level," Picket said softly. "The shafts aren't turned on, so we'll have to walk up the emergency stair." They moved on a few steps.

"Hey, where are you going?" Picket cried in sudden amazement. "The sightseers are down that way! Come back here! Come back!"

Duncan made no answer. With rigid energy he shook off Picket's grip on his arm. He began walking down the corridor toward the distant group of sightseers with long, stiff steps, shaking his head from side to side.

Picket stared at him unbelievably for a second and then came after him. He caught him by both shoulders and held on. "Stop it!" he hissed. "Are you out of your mind?"

With no perceptible exertion Duncan broke away from him. His face was darkly flushed and his lower jaw hung loose. He

made a faint, miserable noise. Then, as if obeying some irresistible call, he started toward the Vaudrians again with the same stiff, bouncing walk.

Picket hesitated. It was already too late. Heads were turning toward them, voices were being raised. His face a mask of bewilderment, Picket leaned back against the bulkhead and incredulously watched.

As Duncan drew nearer the group of sightseers, it shaped itself smoothly into an open square. There was something faintly menacing about the formation, but Duncan did not even slow down. When he was about five feet from the Vaudrians he stopped and, with fingers whose stiffness was apparent to Picket even at that distance, began to unbutton his tunic. The meem hopped out.

Four silenced stun guns hissed softly together. Duncan fell as if he had been poleaxed, stiffly and in one piece. 88 Etath gave a low order to her men. They closed evenly around Duncan and picked him up.

The meem paid no attention to what was going on behind its back. It was wholly occupied with frisking and curvetting around the alluring females of its race. Their attraction—the wonderful attraction which had reached into the cabin seeking the meem and enmeshed Duncan at the same time—held the animal irresistibly.

It knew what would happen to it, but it no longer cared. Since Duncan had stepped into the corridor with it in his tunic it had ceased to struggle and resist. After the mating there would come the egg laying, after the egg laying the long period when the young Vaudrians would feed painfully on its still living flesh.

What did it matter? The desire whose contagion, received telepathically by Duncan, had driven Duncan straight toward the Vaudrian stun guns, burned brightly and compellingly in the meem. Duncan would probably share its final fate as food for the Vaudrian young. What did it matter? The meem was the Vaudrian functional male, the semi-parasitic father of the next generation. Its females were before it. Today was Father's Day. The meem wanted to mate.

★

STAR SHIP

By
POUL
ANDERSON

★

The strangest space-castaways of all!
The Terrans left their great interstel-
lar ship unmanned in a tight orbit
around Khazak—descended, all of
them, in a lifeboat to investigate that
weird, Iron-Age world—and the life-
boat cracked up!

I

WITH SUNSET, THERE WAS rain. When Dougald Anson brought his boat in to Krakenau harbor, there was only a vast wet darkness around him.

He swore in a sulfurous mixture of Krakenau, Volgazani, and half a dozen other languages, including some space-man's Terrestrial, and let down the sail. The canvas was heavy and awkward in the drenching rain; it was all he could do to lash it around the boom. Then he picked up the long wooden sweep and began sculling his boat in toward the dock.

Lightning flared bluely through the rain, and he saw the great bay in one livid flash, filled with galleys at anchor and the little schooners of the fishing fleet. Beyond the wharfs, the land climbed steeply toward the sky, and he saw the dark mass of the town reaching up to the citadel on the hilltop. Dark—dark! Hardly a light showed in the gloom.

What in the name of Shantuzik was up? The waterfront, at least, should have been alive with torches and music and bawdy merriment. And the newly installed street lights should have been twinkling along the main avenues leading up to the castle. Instead Krakenau lay crouched in night, and—

He scowled, and drove the light vessel shoreward with rhythmic sweeps of the long oar. Uneasiness prickled along his spine. It wasn't right. He'd only been gone a few days. What had happened in the

meantime?

When he reached the pier, he made fast with a quietness unusual to him. Maybe he was being overcautious. Maybe it was only that the king had died or some other reason for restrained conduct had arisen. But a man didn't spend years warring among the pirates of the outer islands and the neighboring kingdoms around Krakenau without learning to be careful.

He ducked under the awning in the bows which was the boat's only shelter, and got a towel from the sea chest and rubbed his rain-wet body dry. He'd only been wearing a tattered pair of breeches, and the water ran along his ribs and down his flanks. Then he shrugged on a tunic, and a coat of ring-mail over that. A flat-bladed sword at his side and a helmet over his long yellow hair completed his outfit. He felt secure now, and jumped up to the pier.

For a moment he stood in thought. The steady rain washed down over his leather cape, blurring vision a few meters away, and only the intermittent flicker of lightning broke the darkness. Where to go? His father's house was the logical place, perhaps. But the Masefield dwelling was a little closer to here, and Ellen—

He grinned and set out at a long stride. Masefield's be it.



His blaster raved, and Alonzo had no time to scream before the flame licked about him . . .

The street onto which he turned opened before him like a tunnel of night. The high steep-roofed houses lay dark on either side, walling it in, and the fluoroglobes were unlit. When the lightning blinked, the wet cobblestones gleamed; otherwise there was only darkness and rain.

He passed one of the twisting alleys, and glanced at it with automatic caution. The next instant he had thrown himself to the ground, and the javelin whipped through the place where his belly had been.

He rolled over and bounded to his feet, crouched low, the sword whining out of its scabbard into his hand. Four Khazaki sprang from the alley and darted at him.

Dougald Anson grunted, backed up against a wall. The natives were armed and mailed, they were warriors, and they had all the unhuman swiftness of their species. Four of them——!

The leading attacker met his sword in a clang of steel. Dougald let him come lunging in, took the cut on his mailed ribs, and swept his own weapon murderously out. Faster than a man could think, the Khazaki had his own blade up to parry the sweeping blow. But he wasn't quite fast enough; he met it at an awkward angle and the Terrestrial's sheer power sent the sword spinning from his hand. The hand went too, a fractional second later, and he screamed and fell back and away.

The others were upon Anson. For moments it was parry and slash, three against one, with no time to feel afraid or notice the cuts in his arms and legs. A remote part of his brain told him bleakly: *This is all. You're finished. No lone Earthling ever stood up long to more than two Khazaki.* But he hardly noticed.

Suddenly there were only two in front of him. He darted forth from the wall, his sword crashing down with all the power of his huge body behind it. The warrior tried to skip aside—too late. The tremendous blow smashed his own parry down and sang in his skullbones.

And the last of the attackers died. He tumbled over beside the second, and each of them had a feathered shaft between his ribs.

The bowman came loping through the rain. He paused, in typical Khazak fashion, to slit the throat of the wounded being, and then came up to where Dougald

Anson stood panting.

The human strained through the rainy dark. Lightning glimmered in the sky, and he recognized the newcomer. "Janazik!"

"And Anson," nodded the Khazaki. His sharp white teeth gleamed in his shadowed face. "You seem to have met a warm welcome."

"Too warm. But—thanks!" Anson bent over the nearest of the corpses, and only now did the realization penetrate his brain. They all wore black mail of a certain pattern, spiked helmets, red cloaks—Gods of Gorzak! They were all royal guardsmen!

HE LOOKED UP to the dark form of Janazik, and his lean face was suddenly tight. "What is this?" he asked slowly. "I thought maybe bandits or some enemy state had managed to enter the city——"

"That would be hard to do, now that we have the guns," said Janazik. "No, these are within our own walls. If you'll look closely, you'll see they wear a gold-colored brassard."

"Prince Volakech—but he——"

"There's more to this than Volakech, and more than a question of the throne," said Janazik. Then suddenly, urgently: "But we can't stay here to talk. They're patrolling the streets, it's dangerous to be abroad. Let's get to shelter."

"What's happened?" Anson got up, towering over the native by a good quarter meter, his voice suddenly rough. "What happened? How is everyone?"

"Not well. Come on, now."

"Ellen? Masfield Ellen?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows. Now come on!"

They slipped into the alley. Anson was blind in the gloom, and Janazik's slim six-fingered hand took his to guide him. The Khazaki were smaller than Terrestrials and lacked the sheer strength and endurance which Earth's higher gravity gave; but they could move like the wind, they had an utter grace and balance beside which humans were clumsy cattle, and they saw in the dark.

Dougald Anson's mind whirled in desperate speculation. If Volakech had gotten enough guardsmen and soldiers on his side to swing a palace revolution, it was bad. But matters looked worse than that. Why

should Volakech's men have assaulted a human? Why should Janazik have to sneak him into a hiding place? How had the revolutionists gotten control in the first place, against King Aligan's new weapons? What powers did they have now?

What had become of the human community in Krakenau? What of his father, his brother and sisters, his friends? What of Masefield Ellen? What of Ellen?

He grew aware that Janazik had halted. They were in an evil-smelling, refuse-littered courtyard, surrounded by tumble-down structures, dark and silent as the rest of the city. Anson realized that all Krakenau was blacked out. In such times of danger, the old Khazaki clandom reasserted itself. Families barricaded themselves in their dwellings, prepared to fight all comers till the danger was past. The city was awake, yes—it was crouched in breathless tension all around him—but not a light showed, not a hand stirred, not a voice spoke. They were all waiting.

Janazik crouched at the base of one of the old buildings and lifted a trapdoor. Light gleamed dimly up from a cellar. He dropped lightly down and Anson followed, closing the door behind him.

There was only one smoky lamp in the dank gloom. Shadows were thick and huge around the guttering wick. The red flame picked out faces, shimmered off cold steel, and lost itself in darkness.

Anson's eyes scanned the faces. Half a dozen humans: Chiang Chung-Chen, Du-Frere Marie, Gonzales Alonzo and his wife Nora who was Anson's sister, Dougald Joan, Masefield Philip—No sign of Ellen.

"Anse! Anse!" The voices almost sobbed out of the dim-lit hollowness. Joan and Nora sprang forward as if to touch their brother, make sure he was alive and no vision of the night, but Janazik waved them back with his sword.

"No noise," hissed the Khazaki's fierce whisper. "No noise, by all the thirteen hells! Volakech's *burats* are all over the city. If a patrol finds us——"

"Ellen!" Anson's blue eyes searched for Masefield Philip, crouched near the lamp. "Where's your sister, Phil?"

"I don't know," whispered the boy. "We're all who seem to've escaped. They may have caught her—I don't know——"

"Father." Joan's voice caught with a dry sob. "Anse, Father and Jamie are dead. The rebels killed them."

For a moment, Anson couldn't grasp the reality of that. It just wasn't possible that his big laughing father and young Jamie-the-brat should be killed—*no!*

But——

He looked up, and then looked away. When he turned back to face them, his visage had gone hard and expressionless, and only the white-knuckled grip on his sword showed he was not a stranger.

"All right," he said slowly, very slowly and steadily. "All right. Give me the story. What is it? What's happened in Krakenau?"

II

JANAZIK PADDED AROUND TO stand before him. He was not the only Khazaki in the cellar; there were a good dozen others. Mostly they were young males, and Anse recognized them. Bolazan, Pragakech, Slavatozik—he'd played with them as a child, he'd fared out with them as a youth and a man to the wars, to storm the high citadel of Zarganau and smite the warriors of Volgazan and pirate the commerce of the outer islands. They were good comrades, yes. But Father and Jamie were dead. Ellen, Ellen was vanished. Only a fragment of the human community remained; his world had suddenly come down in ruin about him.

Well—his old bleak resolution came back to him, and he met the yellow slit-pupilled gaze of Janazik with a challenging stare.

They were a strange contrast, these two, for all that they had fought shoulder to shoulder halfway round the planet, had sung and played and roistered from Krakenau to Gorgazan. Comrades in arms, blood brothers maybe, but neither was human from the viewpoint of the other.

Dougald Anson was big even for a Terrestrial; his tawny head rode at full two meters and his wide shoulders strained the chain mail he wore. He was young, but his face had had the youth burned out of it by strange suns and wild winds around the world, was lean and brown and marked with an old scar across the forehead. His eyes were almost intolerably bright and

direct in their blue stare, the eyes of a bird of prey.

The Khazaki was humanoid, to be sure—shorter than the Terrestrial average, but slim and lithe. Soft golden fur covered his sinewy body, and a slender tail switched restlessly against his legs. His head was the least human part of him, with its sloping forehead, narrow chin, and blunt-muzzled face. The long whiskers around his mouth and above the amber cat-eyes twitched continuously, sensitive to minute shifts in air currents and temperature. Along the top of his skull, the fur grew up in a cockatoo plume that swept back down his neck, a secondary sexual characteristic that females lacked.

Janazik was something of a dandy, and even now he wore the baggy silk-like trousers, long red sash, and elaborately embroidered blouse and vest of a Krakenauai noble. It was woefully muddy, but he managed to retain an air of fastidious elegance. The bow and quiver across his back, the sword and dirk at his side, somehow looked purely ornamental when he wore them.

He was almost dwarfed by Anse's huge-thewed height. But old Chiang Chung-Chen noticed, not for the first time, that the human wore clothing and carried weapons of Khazaki pattern, and that the harsh syllables of Krakenauai came more easily to his lips than the Terrestrial of his fathers. And the old man nodded, gravely and a little wearily.

Janazik spoke rapidly: "Volakech must have been plotting his return from exile a long time. He managed to raise a small army of pirates, mercenaries, and outlawed Krakenauai, and he made bargains with groups within the city. Two days ago, certain of the guards seized the new guns and let Volakech and his men in. Others revolted within the town. I think King Aligan was killed; at least I've seen or heard nothing of him since. There's been some fighting between rebels and loyalists but the rebels got all the Earth-weapons when they captured the royal arsenal and since then they've just about crushed resistance. Loyalists who could, fled the city. The rest are in hiding. Volakech is king."

"But—why us? The Terrestrials—what have we to do with—"

Janazik's yellow eyes blazed at him.

"You aren't stupid, blood-brother. Think!"

After a moment Anse nodded bleakly. "*The Star Ship*—"

"Of course! Volakech has seized the rocket boat. No Terrestrial in his right mind would show him how to use it, so he had to capture someone who understood its operation and force them to take him out to the Star Ship. Old Masefield Henry was killed resisting arrest—you know how bloody guardsmen are, in spite of orders to take someone alive. Volakech ordered the arrest of all Terrestrials then. A few surrendered to him, a few were killed resisting, most were captured by force. As far as we know, this group is all which escaped."

"Then Ellen—?"

"That's the weird thing. I don't believe she has been caught. Volakech's men are still scouring the city for 'an Earthling woman' as the orders read. And who could it be but Ellen? No other woman represents any danger or any desirable capture to Volakech."

"Ellen understands astrogation," said Anse slowly. "She learned it from her grandfather."

"Yes. And now that he is dead, she is the only human—the only being on this planet—who can get that rocket up to the Star Ship. And Masefield Carson knows it."

"Carson? Ellen's older brother? What—"

Janazik's voice was cold as Winter: "Masefield Carson was with Volakech. He led the rebels inside the city. Now he's the new king's lieutenant."

"Carson! No!"

"Carson—yes!" Janazik's smile was without mirth or pity. His eyes sought out Philip, huddled miserably beside the lamp. "Isn't that the truth?"

THE BOY NODDED, too choked with his own unhappiness to cry. "Carse always was a friend of Volakech, before King Aligan outlawed him," he mumbled. "And he always said how it was a shame, and how Volakech would know better what to do with the Star Ship than anyone now. Then—that night—" His voice trailed off, he sat dumbly staring into the flame.

"Carson led the rebel guardsmen in their seizure of the city guns," said Janazik.

"He also rode to the Masefield house at the head of a troop of them and called on his people to surrender on promise of good treatment. Joe and the mother did, and I suppose they're held somewhere in the citadel now. Phil and Ellen happened to be out at the time. When Phil heard of the uprising, he was afraid to give himself up, in spite of the heralds that went about promising safety to those who did. He heard how the rebels had been killing his friends. He went to Slavatozik here, whom he could trust, and later they got in touch with me. I'd used this hiding place before, and gathered all the fugitives I could find here." Janazik shrugged, a sinuous unhuman gesture. "Since then I've seen Carse, at a distance, riding around like a prince of the blood, with a troop of his own personal guardsmen. I suspect he really runs things now. Volakech wants power, but only Carse can show him how to get it."

"And Ellen—?"

"No sign of her. But as I said, I think she's in hiding somewhere, or the guards wouldn't be out looking for a woman. She wouldn't give herself up."

"Not Ellen." A grim pride lifted Anse's head.

"Remains the problem of finding her before they do," said Gonzales Alonzo. "If they catch her and make her plot an orbit for the rocket, they'll have the Star Ship—which means power over the whole planet."

"Not that I care who's king," growled Pragakech. "But you know that Masefield Carson never did want to use the ship to get out to the stars. And I want to see those other worlds before I die."

"To the thirteenth hell with the other worlds," snarled Bolazan. "Aligan was my king, and it's for me to avenge him and put his rightful heir on the throne."

"We all have our motives for wanting the blood of Volakech and Carson," said Janazik. "Never mind that now; the important thing is how to get at their livers. We're few, Anse. Here are all the free humans we know of, except Masefield Ellen. There can't be more than two or three at large, and perhaps ten dead. That means the enemy holds almost a hundred humans captive. Discounting children and others who are ignorant of Terrestrial science, it still means they'll be able to operate the

guns, the steel mill, the atomic-power plant—all the new machines except the rocket boat, and they only need Ellen for that."

Anse nodded, slowly. "What is our strength?" he asked.

"I don't know. Not much. I know where about a hundred Khazaki warriors are hiding, ready to follow us whenever we call on them, and there will be many more sitting at home now who'll rise if someone else takes the lead. But the enemy has all the guns. It would be suicide."

"What about the Khazaki who fled?" Usually, in one of the planet's violent changes of governments, the refugees were powerful nobles who would be slain as a safety measure if they stayed at home but who could, in exile, raise strong forces for a comeback. Such a one had Volakech himself been, barely escaping with his life after his disastrous attempt to seize the throne a few years back.

"Don't be more stupid than you can help," snorted Janazik. "By the time they can have rallied enough to do any good, Volakech and Carson will have the Star Ship, one way or another, and then the whole world is at their mercy."

"That means we have to strike back somehow—quickly!" Anse stood for a moment in thought.

The habits of his warring, wandering years were coming back to him. He had faced death and despair before, and with strength and cunning and bluff and sheer luck had come through alive. This was another problem, more desperate and more urgent, but still another problem.

No—there was more to it than that.

HIS FACE GREW BLEAK, and it was as if a coldness touched his heart. Carson was Ellen's older brother, and even if they had quarreled from time to time he knew she had always felt deeply bound to him. *Carse is everything I never was. He stayed in Krakenau and studied and became an educated man and a skilled engineer while I went hallooing over the world. He's brave and a good fighter—so am I—but he's so much more than that. I imagine it was his example that made Ellen learn the astrogation only her grandfather knew.*

And now I'm back from roaming and roving with Janazik, and I'm trying hard

to settle down and learn something so that I won't be just a barbarian, a wild Khazaki in human skin, when we go out to the civilization of the stars. So that I won't be too utterly ashamed to ask Ellen to marry me. And it was all going pretty well until now.

But now—I'm fighting her brother—

Well—he pushed the thought out of his brain. After all, apparently she was in opposition to Carse's plans too.

"I wonder why they tried to kill me?" he asked aloud, more to fill in the time while he thought than out of curiosity.

"You'd be of no use to Carson, having no technical education," said Janazik, "while your knowledge of fighting and your connections with warlike groups make you dangerous to him. Also, I don't think he ever liked your paying attention to Ellen."

"No—he always said I was a waster. Called me a—an absorbed Khazaki. I'd've split his skull if he hadn't been Ellen's brother—No matter now. We've more important things to talk over."

Have we, now? he thought sickly. Carson must know Ellen well, better than I do. If he thinks he can have me killed without making her hate him, then—maybe I never had any chance with her then—

"How'd you happen by?" he asked tonelessly.

"I've been out from time to time, looking for Ellen and killing guardsmen whenever I could catch them alone." Janazik's white fangs gleamed in a carnivore's smile. "And, of course, I expected you back from your fishing trip about this time, and watched for you lest you blunder into their hands."

Anse began to pace the floor, back and forth, his head bent to avoid the basement rafters. If Carson was in control, and out to kill him . . . There was more to it than that, of course. The whole future of the planet Khazak, perhaps of the fabulous Galactic civilization itself, was balanced on the edge of a sword. If Volakech or a descendant of his took the warlike race out among the stars, with a high level of industry to back a scheme of conquest—

But it didn't matter. All the universe didn't matter. There was only Ellen, and his own dead kin, and himself.

A man's heart can only hold so much. Janazik stood quietly back, watching his

friend's restless prowling. He had seen that pacing before, and he knew that some scheme would come out of it, crazy and reckless and desperate, with his own cool unhuman intelligence to temper it and make it workable. He and Anse made a good team. They made the best damned fighting team Khazak had ever seen.

Presently the human lifted his head. There was silence in the hiding place, thick and taut, so that they could hear their own breathing and the steady drum of rain on the trapdoor.

"I have an idea," said Anse.

III

THE LONG NIGHT WORE ON.

Janazik had sent most of his Khazaki out to alert the other loyalists in their hiding places, but only they had a chance of slipping unobserved past the enemy patrols. Humans, obviously alien, slow-footed and clumsy beside the flitting shadows of Khazak, would never get far. They had to wait.

Anse was glad of the opportunity for conference with Janazik, planning the assault on the citadel. Neither of them was very familiar with the layout, but Alonzo, as an engineer on the rocket building project, and old Chiang had been there often enough to know it intimately.

It was impossible that a few hundred warriors armed with the primitive weapons of Khazak could take the stronghold. Its walls were manned by more fighters than that, and there were the terrible Earth-type guns as well. Alonzo had a blaster with a couple of charges, but otherwise there was nothing modern in the loyalist force.

But still that futile assault was necessary—

"It's taking a desperate chance," said Dougald Joan. She was young yet, hardly out of girlhood, but her voice had an indomitable ring. The true warriors among the five Earthling families were all Dougalds thought Janazik. "Suppose Ellen doesn't come out of hiding? Suppose she's dead or—or captured already, in spite of what we think."

"We'll just have to try and destroy the rocket then," said Alonzo. "Certainly we can't let Volakech get to the Star Ship."

He sighed, heavily. "And the labor of another generation will be gone."

"It wouldn't take us long to build another boat," said his wife. "We know how, now, and we have the industry to do it."

"There are only a few who really know how to handle and build the Terrestrial machines, and most of them are in the enemy's hands," reminded old Chiang. "I'm sure I couldn't tell you much about atomic engines, even though I was on the Star Ship herself once. If those few are killed, we may never be able to duplicate our efforts. What Terrestrials survive will sink back into barbarism, become simply another part of Khazaki culture."

"I don't know——" said Nora.

"I know, because I've seen it happen," insisted Chiang. "In the fifty years since we were marooned here, two generations have been born on Khazak. They've grown up among Khazaki, played with native children, worked and fought with Khazaki natives, adopted the dress and speech and whole outlook of Krakenau. Only a few in this third generation have consciously tried to remain—Terrestrial. I must admit that Masefield Carson is one such. Ellen is another. But few others."

"Would you have us wall ourselves out from the world?" asked Anse with a bridling anger.

"No. I don't see how the situation could be helped. We are a minority in an alien culture with which we've had to cooperate. It's only natural that we'd be more assimilated than assimilating. Even at that, we've wrought immense changes."

JANAZIK NODDED. The stranded Terrestrials had found themselves in an early Iron Age civilization of city-states, among a race naturally violent and predatory. For their own survival, they had had to league forces with the state in which they found themselves—Krakenau, as it happened. Before they could build the industry they needed, they had to have some security—which meant that they must teach the Krakenau military principles and means of making new weapons which would make them superior to their neighbors. After that—well, it took an immense technology to build even a small spaceship. The superalloys which could stand the combustion of rocket fuel

required unheard-of elements such as manganese and chromium, which required means of mining and refining them, which required a considerable chemical plant, which required—How far down do you have to start? And there were a hundred or a thousand other requirements of equal importance and difficulty.

Besides, the Terrestrials had had to learn much from scratch themselves. None of them had ever built a rocketship, had ever seen one in action even. It was centuries obsolete in Galactic civilization. But gravity drives were out of the question. So—they'd had to design the ship from the ground up. Which meant years of painstaking research . . . and only a few interested humans and Khazaki to do it. The rest were too busy with their own affairs in the brawling barbaric culture.

Ten years ago, the first spaceboat had blasted off toward the Star Ship—and exploded in mid-acceleration. More designing, more testing, more slow building—and now the second one lay ready. Perhaps it could reach the Star Ship.

The Star Ship—faster than light, weightless when it chose to be for all its enormous mass, armed with atomic guns that could blast a city to superheated vapor. Whoever controlled that ship could get to Galactic stars in a matter of weeks. Or could rule all Khazaki if he chose.

No wonder Carson and Volakech had struck now, before the rocket boat was launched. When *they* had the ship—

But only Ellen knew the figures of its orbit and the complicated calculations by which the boat would plot a course to get there. A bold warrior might make a try at reaching the ship by seat-of-the-pants piloting, but he wouldn't have much chance of making it. So Ellen, and the rocket boat, were the fulcrum of the future.

"Strange," mused Chiang. "Strange that we should have had that accident . . ."

They had heard the story a hundred times before, but they gathered around to listen; there was nothing else to do while the slow hours dragged on.

"We were ten, all told, five men and their wives. Exploratory expeditions are often out for years at a time, so the Service makes it a policy to man the ships with married couples. It's hard for a Khazaki to appreciate the absolute equality

between the sexes which human civilization has achieved. It's due to the advanced technology, of course, and we're losing it as we go back to barbarism—"

Anse felt a small hand laid on his arm. He looked down into the dark eyes of Du-Frere Marie. She was a pretty girl, a little younger than he, and until he'd really noticed Ellen he'd been paying her some attention.

"I don't care about equality," she whispered. "A woman shouldn't try to be a man. I'd want only to cook and keep house for my man, and bear his children."

It was, Anse realized, a typical Khazaki attitude. But—he remembered with a sudden pity that Carson had been courting Marie. "This is pretty tough on you," he muttered. "I'll try to see that Carse is saved . . . If we win," he added wryly.

"Him? I don't care about that Masefield. Let them hang him. But Anse—be careful—"

HE LOOKED AWAY, his face hot in the gloom, realizing suddenly why Masefield Carson hated him. Briefly, he wished he hadn't had such consistent luck with women. But the accident that there was a preponderance of females in the second and third generations of Khazaki humans had made it more or less inevitable, and he—well, he was only human. There'd been Earthling girls; and not a few Khazaki women had been intrigued by the big Terrestrial. *Yes, I was lucky*, he thought bitterly. *Lucky in all except the one that mattered.*

"—we'd been a few weeks out of Avandar—it was an obscure outpost then, though I imagine it's grown since—when we detected this Sol-type sun. Seeing that there was an Earth-like planet, we decided to investigate. And since we were all tired of being cooped in the ship, and telescopes showed that any natives which might exist would be too primitive to endanger us, we all went down in the lifeboat.

"And the one-in-a-billion chance happened . . . the atomic converters went out of control and we barely escaped from the boat before it was utterly consumed. We were stranded on an alien planet, with nothing but our clothes and a few hand weapons—and with our ship that would go faster than light circling in its orbit not ten

thousand kilometers above us!

"No chance of rescue. There are just too many suns for the Galactic Coordinators to hope to find a ship that doesn't come back. Expansion into this region of space wasn't scheduled for another two centuries. So there we were, and until we could build a boat which would take us back to our ship—there we stayed!

"And it's taken us fifty years so far . . ."

Pragakech came in with the rain glistening on his fur and running in small puddles about his padding feet. "We're ready," he said. "Every warrior whose hiding place we knew has been contacted."

"Then we might as well go." Janazik got up and stretched luxuriously. His eyes were like molten gold in the murky light.

"So soon?" Marie held Anse back with anxious hands. "This same night?"

"The sooner the better," Anse said grimly. "Every day that goes by, more of our friends will be found out and killed, more places will be searched for Ellen, Volakech's grip on the city will grow stronger." He put the spiked helmet back on his head, and buckled the sword about his mailed waist. "Come on, Janazik. The rest stay here and wait for word. If we're utterly defeated, such of us as survive will manage to get back and lead you out of Krakenau—somehow."

Marie started to say something, then shook her head as if the words hurt her throat and drew Anse's face down to hers. "Goodbye, then," she whispered. "Goodbye, and the gods be with you."

He kissed her more awkwardly than was his wont, feeling himself a thorough scoundrel. Then he followed Pragakech and Janazik out the trapdoor.

IV

THE COURTYARD was filled with Khazaki warriors, standing silently in the slow heavy rain. It was the darkness of early morning, and only an occasional wan lightning flash, gleaming on spears and axes, broke the chill gloom. Anse was aware of softly-moving supple bodies pressing around him, of night-seeing eyes watching him with an impassive stare. It was he and Janazik who had the plan, and who had the most experience in warfare, and the rest looked to them for lead-

ership. It was not easy to stand under that cool, judging scrutiny, and Anse strode forth into the street with a feeling of relief at the prospect of action.

As they moved toward the castle, along the narrow cobbled lanes winding up the hills, their army grew. Warriors came loping from alleys, came slipping out of the dark barricaded houses, seemed to rise out of the rainy night around them. All Krakenau was abroad, it seemed, but quietly, quietly.

And throughout the town other such forces were on the move, gathering under the lead of anyone who could be trusted, converging on the citadel and the rocketship it guarded.

Tonight—victory, or destruction of the boat and a drawn battle . . . or repulsion and ultimate shattering defeat. The gods are abroad tonight.

Somewhere, faint and far through the dull washing of rain, a trumpet blew a harsh challenge, once and again. After it came a distance-muted shouting of voices and a clattering of swords.

"One of our bands has come across a patrol," said Janazik unnecessarily. "Now all hell will be loose in Krakenau. Come on!"

They broke into a trot up the hill. Rounding a sharp turn in the street, they saw a close-ranked mass of warriors with spears aloft.

Guardsmen!

The two forces let out a simultaneous yell and charged at each other in the disorderly Khazaki fashion. It was beginning to lighten just a little; Anse could make out enough for purposes of battle. Hai-ah—here we go!

He smashed into a leading guard, who stabbed at him with his long pike. The edge grazed off Anse's heavy chain mail as the Earthling chopped out with his sword. He knocked the shaft aside and thrust in, hewing at the Khazaki's neck. The guard intercepted the blow with his shield, and suddenly rammed it forward. The murderous spike on its boss thudded against the Terrestrial's broad chest and the linked rings gave under that blow—just a little, just enough to draw blood. Anse roared and chopped down across the other's right arm. The Khazaki howled his pain and stumbled back.

Another was on the Earthling like a spitting cat. Swords hummed and clashed together. Leaping and dodging, the Khazaki lashed out with a blade like a flickering flame, and none of Anse's blows could land on him.

The Khazaki leaped in suddenly, his edge reaching for the human's unprotected throat. Anse parried with his sword, while his left fist shot out like an iron cannonball. It hit the native full in the face, with a crunch of splintering bones. The guard's head snapped back and he fell to the blood-running street.

Janazik was fighting two at once, his sword never resting. He leaped and danced like the shadow of a flame in the wind, and he was laughing—laughing! Anse hewed out, and one of the foemen's heads sprang from its neck. Janazik darted in, there was a blur of steel, and the other guardsman toppled.

Axe and sword! Spear and dagger and flying arrows! The fight rolled back and forth between the darkling walls of houses. It grew with time; Volakech's patrols were drawn by the noise, loyalists crouched in hiding heard of the attack and sped to join it. Anse and Janazik fought side by side, human brawn and Khazaki swiftness, and the corpses were heaped where they went.

A pike raked Anse's hand. He dropped his sword and the enemy leaped in with drawn knife. Anse did not reach for his own dirk—no human had a chance in a knife fight with a Khazaki—but his arms snaked out, his hands closed on the native's waist, and he lifted the enemy up and hurled him against another. They both went down in a crash of denting armor and snapping bones. Anse roared his war-cry and picked up his sword again.

JANAZIK LEAPED and darted and fenced, grinning as he fought, demon-lights in his yellow eyes. A spear was hurled at him. He picked it out of the air, one-handed, and threw it back, even as he fought another guardsman. The rebel took advantage of it to get in under Janazik's guard. Swifter than thought, the warrior's dagger was in his left hand—and into the rebel's throat.

Back and forth the battle swayed, roaring, trampling, and the rain mingled with blood between the cobblestones. Thunder of

weapons, shrieking of wounded, shouting of challenges—lightning dancing overhead! Suddenly it was over.

Anse looked up from his last victim and saw that the confusion no longer snarled around him. The street was heaped with dead and wounded, and a few individual battles were still going on. But the surviving guardsmen were in full flight, and the victorious warriors were shouting their triumph.

"That was a fight!" panted Janazik. He quivered with feral eagerness. "Now on to the castle!"

"I think," said Slavatozik thoughtfully, "that this was the decisive struggle as far as the city is concerned. Look at how many were involved. Almost all the patrols must have come here—and now they're beaten. We hold the city!"

"Not much good to us while Volakech is in the castle," said Anse. "He need only sally forth with the Earth-weapons—" He leaned on his sword, gasping great lungfuls of the cool wet air into him. "But where's Ellen?"

"We've had heralds out shouting for her, as you suggested," said Slavatozik. "Now that the city is in our control, she should come out. If not——"

"—then I know how to blow up the boat," said Gonzales Alonzo bleakly. "If we can get inside the citadel to it."

The loyalists were reassembling their forces. Warriors moved over the scene of battle, plundering dead guardsmen, cutting the throats of wounded enemies and badly mutilated friends. It was a small army that was crowding around Anse's tall form.

His worried eyes probed into the dull gray light of the rainy dawn. Of a sudden, he stiffened and peered more closely. Someone was coming down the street, thrusting through the assembled warriors. Someone—someone—he knew that bright bronze hair . . .

Ellen.

He stood waiting, letting her come up to him, and his eyes were hungry. She was tall and full-bodied and supple, graceful almost as a Khazaki, and her wide-set eyes were calm and gray under a broad clear forehead and there was a dusting of freckles over her straight nose and her mouth was wide and strong and generous and—

"Ellen," he said wonderingly. "Ellen."

"What are you doing?" she asked. "What have you planned?"

No question of how he was, no look at the blood trickling along his sides and splashed over his face and arms—well—"Where were you?" he asked, and cursed himself for not being able to think of a better greeting.

"I hid with the family of Azakhagar," she said. "I lay in their loft when the patrolmen came searching for me. Then I heard your heralds going through the streets, calling on me to come out in your name. So I came."

"How did you know it wasn't a trick of Volakech's?" asked someone.

"I told the heralds to use my name and add after it—well—something that only she and I knew," said Anse uncomfortably.

JANAZIK remained impassive, but he recalled that the phrase had been "Dougald Anson, who once told you something on a sunny day down by Zamanaui River." He could guess what the something had been. Well, it seemed to happen to all Earthmen sooner or later, and it meant the end of the old unregenerate days. He sighed, a little wistfully.

"But what did you want me for?" asked Ellen. She stood before Anse in her short, close-fitting tunic, the raindrops glittering in her heavy coppery hair, and he thought wryly that the question was in one sense superfluous. But in another sense, and with time so desperately short—

"You're the only one of us who can plot a course for the rocket," he said. "Alonzo here, or almost anyone, should be able to pilot it, but you're the only one who can take it to the Star Ship. So that, of course, is why Carson and Volakech were after you, and why we had to have you too. If we can get into the citadel, capture the rocket and get up to the Star Ship, it'll be easy to overthrow Volakech. But if he gets there first, all Khazak couldn't win against him."

She nodded, slowly and wearily. Her gray eyes were haunted. "I wonder if it matters who gets there," she said. "I wonder why we're fighting and killing each other. Over who shall sit on the throne of

an obscure city-state on an insignificant planet? Over the exact disposition to be made of one little spaceship? It isn't worth it." She looked around at the sprawled corpses, lying on the bloody cobblestones with rain falling in their gaping mouths, and shuddered. "It isn't worth that."

"There's more to it than that," said Janazik bleakly. "Masefield Carson and his friend—his puppet, I think—Volakech would use the ship to bring all the world under their rule. Then they would mold it into a pattern suited for conquering a small empire among the neighboring stars."

"Volakech always talked that way, before his first revolution," said Ellen. "And Carse used to say—but that can't be right! He can't have meant it. And even if he did—what of it? Is it worth enough for brothers to slay each other over?"

"Yes." Janazik's voice was pitiless. "Shall the freemen of Khazak become the regimented hordes of a tyrant? Let all this world be blown asunder first!"

"Shall the innocent folk of the other stars become his victims?" urged Alonzo. "Shall Khazak become a menace to the Galaxy, one which must be destroyed—or must itself destroy? Shall there be war with—Earth herself?"

"To Shantuzik with that," growled Anse. "These are our enemies, to be fought and beaten. Out there is the great civilization of the Galaxy, and they would keep us from it for generations yet, and make it in the end our foe. And Volakech is a murderer with no right to the throne of Krakenau. I say let's get at his liver!"

"Well—" Ellen looked away. When she turned back, there was torment in her eyes, but her voice was low and steady: "I'm with you in whatever you plan. But on one condition. Carse is not to be harmed."

"Not harmed!" exploded Janazik. "Why, that dirty traitor deserves—"

"He is still my brother," said Ellen. "When Volakech is beaten, he will not be able to do any more harm, and he will see that he was wrong." Her eyes flashed coldly. "Whoever hurts Carse will have me for blood-enemy!"

"As you will," shrugged Anse, trying to hide the pain in his heart. "But now . . . Our plan is to storm the citadel. We can't hope to take it, but we'll keep the gar-

rison busy. Meanwhile a few of us break in, get the rocket, and take it back out here, where you will have an orbit plotted—"

"I can't make one that quickly. And who can pilot it well enough to land it here without cracking it up?"

THEY LOOKED at each other, and then eyes turned to Gonzales Alonzo. He smiled mirthlessly. "I can try," he said. "But I'm only an engineer; I never imagined I'd have to fly the thing. Chiang Ching-Wei was supposed to be the pilot, but he's a prisoner now."

"If we smash the rocket—well, then we smash it," said Anse heavily. "It'll mean a long and hard war against Volakech from outside, and he'll have all the advantages of the new weapons. We may never overthrow him before he gets another boat built. Still—we'll just have to try."

Ellen said quietly: "I can pilot it."

"You!"

"Of course. I've been working on the second boat from the beginning. I know it as well as anyone, every seam and rivet and wiring diagram. I was aboard when Chiang took her on a practice run only a few days ago. I'll fly it for you!"

"You can't—we have to fight our way into the castle itself, the very heart of Volakech's power—you'd be killed!"

"It's the best chance. If you think we can get in at all, I stand as good a chance of living through it as anyone else."

"She's right," said Janazik. "And while we waste time here arguing, the citadel is getting ready. Come on!"

Automatically, Anse broke into movement, trotting along beside Janazik, and the army formed its ranks and followed them.

He had time for a few hurried words with Ellen, whispered as they went up the hill: "Stay close by me. There'll be a small group of us getting in, picked fighters, and we'll make a ring about you."

"Of course," she nodded. Her gray eyes shone, and she was breathing quickly. "I begin to see why you were a rover all those years, Anse. It's mad and desperate and terrible—but before Cosmos, we're alive!"

"Most recruits are frightened green before their first battle," he said. "You have

a warrior's heart, Ellen—"He broke off, hearing the banality of his own words.

"Listen, my dearest," he said then, quickly. "We may not come alive through all this. But remember what I did say, down by the river that day. I love you."

She was silent. He went on, fumbling for words: "You wouldn't answer me then——"

"I thought it was just your usual talk to women."

"It may have been—then," he admitted. "But it hasn't been since, and it isn't now."

His sword-calloused hand found hers. "Don't forget, Ellen. I love you. I will always love you."

"Anse——" She turned toward him, and he saw her eyes alight. "Anse——"

A bugle shrilled through the rain, high and harsh ahead of them. Dimly, they made out the monstrous bulk of the castle, looming through the misty gray light, its towers lost in the vague sky. Janazik's sword flashed from its sheath.

"The battle begins," said a voice out of the blurring rain.

Anse drew Ellen over against a wall and kissed her. Her lips were cool and firm under his, wet with rain; he would never forget that kiss while life was in him.

They looked at each other for a moment of wonder, and then broke apart and followed Janazik.

V

THE LOYALISTS CHARGED IN a living wave that roared as it surged against the castle walls and spattered a foam of blood and steel. From three sides they came, weaving in and out of the hailing arrows, lifting shields above them, leaving their dead behind them.

The blaster cannon mounted on the walls spouted flame and thunder. Warriors were mowed down before that whirling white fury, armor melted when the lightning-like discharges played over it, but still the assault went on with all the grim bitter courage of the Khazaki race.

Old siege engines were appearing, dragged out of storehouses and hiding places where they had been kept against such a day of need. Now the great catapults and ballistae were mounted; stones and fireballs and iron-headed bolts were

raking the walls. A testudo moved awkwardly forth up the steep hill toward the gates. It was blasted to flaming molten ruin, but another got underneath the walls and the crash of a battering ram came from under its roof.

Shadowlike in the blinding rain, the warriors flitted up toward the walls. No spot of cover was too small for one of those ghostly shapes; they seemed to carry their own invisibility with them. Under the walls—scaling ladders appearing as if out of nowhere—up the walls and into the castle!

The ladders were hurled down. The warriors who gained the walls were blasted by cannon, cut down by superior numbers, lost in a swirl of battle and death. Boiling water rained down over the walls on those below, spears and arrows and the roaring blaster bolts. But still they came. Still the howling, screeching demons of Krakenau came, and died, and came again.

Anse cursed, softly, luridly, pain croaking in his voice: "We can't be with them. They're being slaughtered and we can't be with them."

"We're needed worse here," said Janazik curtly. "If only Pragakech can maintain the assault for an hour——"

He and Anse loped in the forefront. Behind them came Gonzales, Ellen, and a dozen picked young Khazaki. They wove through a maze of alleys and streets and deserted market squares, working around behind the castle. The roar of battle came to them out of the gray mist of rain; otherwise there was only the padding and splashing of their own feet, the breath rasping harsh in their lungs, the faint clank and jingle of their harness. All Krakenau not at the storming of the citadel had withdrawn into the mysterious shells of the houses, lay watching and waiting and whetting knives in the dark.

The paths dipped steeply downward, until, when they came around behind the citadel and stood peering out of a tunnel-like alley, there was a sheer cliff-face before them. On this side the castle was impregnable. The only approach was a knife-edged trail winding up the cliff, barely wide enough for one man at a time. At its top, flush with the precipice edge, the wall was built. Against this wall, commanding the trail, there had in the old days

been an archer post, but lately a cannon had been mounted there.

Yet that very security, thought Anse, might be a weakness. Except for that gun, the approach wouldn't be watched, especially with the fight going on elsewhere. So—

"Give me your weapon, Alonzo," said Janazik.

"Here." Gonzales handed him the blaster pistol. "But it only has two charges left in it."

"That may be enough." Janazik slipped it under his cloak. Then he wound a gold brassard about his arm and started up the trail. A couple of his Khazaki came behind them, then Anse, Ellen, and Alonzo, and finally the rest of the warriors.

THE TRAIL WAS STEEP and slippery, water swirling down it, loose rocks moving uneasily beneath the feet—and it was a dizzying drop off the sheer edge to the ground below. They wound upward slowly, panting, cursing, wondering how much of a chance their desperate scheme really had.

Ellen slipped a little. Anse reached back and caught her hand. He smiled lop-sidedly. "Now I don't want to let go," he said.

"I wonder—" Ellen looked away, then back to him, and her eyes were wide and puzzled. "I wonder if I want you to, Anse."

His heart seemed to jump up into his throat, but he let her go and said wryly: "I'm afraid I have to right now. But wait till later."

Up and up—*Later! Will there ever be a later?*

And if there is, what then? I'm still more than half a Khazaki. Can we live together in the great civilization I hardly comprehend?

It was simpler when Janazik and I were warring over the planet . . . Janazik! I wonder if two beings of the same race could ever know as close a friendship as that between us two aliens. We've fought and laughed and sung together, we've saved each other's lives, sweated and suffered and been afraid, together. We know each other as we will never know any other being.

Well, it passes. We'll always remain close friends, I suppose. But the old comradeship—I'll have to give that up.

But Ellen—

Up and up—

Janazik whistled, long and loud, and called: "Hail Volakech! Friends!"

He could dimly see the looming bulk of the blaster cannon, crouched behind its iron shield. Above it the walls of the castle were high and dark and—empty.

The voice came from ahead of him, taut with nervousness: "Who goes there?"

"A friend. I have a message for His Highness." Janazik moved forward almost casually. His eyes gleamed with mirth. It tickled his heart, this dicing with death. Someday he'd overreach himself and that would be the end, but until then he was having fun.

"Advance . . . No, no one else. Just you alone."

Janazik sauntered forward until he stood only a meter from the blunt ugly muzzle. He had his left arm out of his cloak, so that the golden brassard shone in plain view. Underneath, his right hand thumbed the catch of Alonzo's pistol.

"Who are you?" challenged the voice from behind the shield.

"A messenger for His Highness from his allies in Volgazan," said Janazik. "Seeing that there was still fighting going on, I and my men decided to come in the back way."

"Well—I suppose I can let you in, under guard. But your men will have to stay out here."

"Very well." Janazik strolled over behind the shield.

There were three warriors crouched there, in front of a small door in the wall. One of them was about to blow his trumpet for a guard detail. The other two poised their spears near Janazik's throat. None of them thought that anyone outside the citadel might possess an Earth-weapon.

JANAZIK SHOT right through his cloak. In that narrow space, the ravenous discharge blinded and blistered him, stung his face with flying particles of molten iron. The hammer-blow of concussion sent him reeling back against the wall. His cloak caught afire; he ripped it off and flung it down on the three blackened corpses before him.

Vision returned to his dazzled eyes.

These Earth-weapons were hideous things, he thought; they made nothing of courage or strength or even cunning. He wondered what changes Galactic civilization would bring to old Khazak, and didn't think he'd like most of them. Maybe Volakech was right.

But Anse was his comrade and Aligan had been his king. He whistled, and the others came running up.

"Quick," rasped Janazik. "The noise may draw somebody—quick, inside!"

"Can't we swing this lightning thrower around and blast them?" wondered a Khazaki.

"No, it's fixed in place." Anse threw his brawny shoulders against the solid mass of the door. It swung ponderously back and they dashed through the tunnel in the thick wall—out into the open courtyard of the castle!

The noises of the fight rose high from here, but there were only a few warriors in sight, scurrying back and forth on their errands without noticing the newcomers—a fact which did not surprise Anse or Janazik, who knew what vast confusion a battle was. The human remembered the layout now—the rocket would be over by the machine shops, near the donjon keep—"This way!"

They trotted across the court, around the gray stone bulk of the citadel's buildings and towers, toward the long wooden shed which housed the new machine shop. The rain was beginning to slacken now, and the sun was up behind its gray veil, so that there was light shining through slanting silver. Against the dark walls, the lean torpedo shape of the rocket boat gleamed like a polished spearhead.

"Now—ahead!" Janazik broke into a run toward the boat, and they followed him in a close ring about Ellen.

A band of fighters came around the corner of the machine shop, in front of the rocket. The wet light shone off their brassards. Janazik swore bitterly, and his hand dropped to his sword.

One of the enemy warriors let out a yell. "Earthlings—two—three of them! Not ours—"

The blaster crashed in Janazik's hand, and five dropped their charred bodies on the ground. With a spine-shivering yell, Janazik bounded forward, and after him

came Anse, Alonzo, and a round dozen of the fiercest fighters in Krakenau. The blaster was exhausted now—but they had their swords!

The leader of the enemy band was a huge Khazaki, dark-furred and green-eyed. His men were scattering in panic, but he roared a bull-voiced command and they rallied about him and stood before the rocket.

Volakech. By all the thirteen hells, *Volakech!*

He must have been leading reinforcements to a threatened point on the wall, thought Anse in a fleeting moment, and his sharp mind had instantly deduced that the invaders were after the rocket—and that they could have no more blaster charges, or they would be using them. And Volakech's band was still larger than theirs, and he had all the forces of the citadel behind him if he could summon them!

THE TWO BANDS CRASHED together and steel began to fly. Anse stood before Ellen and lashed out at a spitting Khazaki who reached for his belly with a sword. The enemy dodged past his guard, drilled in close. Ellen shouted and kicked at the native's ankles. He stumbled, dropping his defense, and Anse clove his skull.

Volakech roared. He swung a huge battle axe, and its shock and thunder rose high over the swaying tide of battle. Two of Janazik's men leaped at him. He swept the axe in a terrible arc and the spike cracked one pate and the edge split the other's face open. Alonzo sprang at him with furious courage, wielding a sword. Volakech knocked it spinning from his hand, but, before he could kill the engineer, Anse was on him.

They traded blows in a clamor of steel. Axe and sword clashed together, sheared along chain mail and rang on helmets. It was a blur of rake and slash and parry, with Volakech grinning at him behind a network of whirling steel.

Anse gathered his strength and pressed forward with reckless fury. His sword hummed and whistled and roared against Volakech's hard-held guard. He laid open arms, legs, cheek; he probed and lunged for the rebel king's trunk. Volakech

snarled, but step by step he was driven back.

Warriors fell, but it was on the bodies of foemen and even dying they stabbed upward at the enemy. Bitter, bloody, utterly ruthless, the struggle swayed about the rocketship. It was old Khazak that fought, the planet of warriors, and, even as he hewed and danced and slew, Janazik thought bleakly that he was trying to end the gory magnificence of that age; he was bringing civilization and with it the doom of his own kind. Khazak of the future would not be the same world.

If they won—if they won!

"To me!" he yelled. "To me, men of Aligan! Hai, Aligan! Krakenau! Dougald!"

They heard and rallied round him, the last gasping survivors of his band. But there were few of Volakech's men left, few.

"Volakech! Aid the king! To me, men of Volakech!" The rebel shouted at the top of his lungs. And Anse lunged in at him, beating against the swift armor of the axe.

"Anse!" Janazik's urgent shout cut through the clangor of battle. "Anse, here! We're blasting free!"

The human hardly heard him. He forced his way closer in against Volakech, his sword whistling about the usurper's helmeted head.

"Anse!" shouted Janazik. "Anse—Ellen needs you—"

With a tiger snarl, Anse broke free from his opponent and whirled about. A rebel stood before him. There was an instant of violence too swift to be followed, and Anse leaped over the ripped body and up to Janazik.

The Khazaki stood by the airlock. There was a ring of corpses before him; his sword ran blood.

"Ellen?" gasped Anse. "Ellen?"

"Inside," rasped Janazik. "She's inside. We have to get out of here—only way to get your attention—*Come on!*"

Anse saw the armed band swarming at them from one of the outer towers, defenders who had finally noticed the battle at the rocket and were coming to aid their king. Not a chance against them—except the boat!

6—Planet Stories—Fall

Man and Khazaki stepped back into the airlock. A storm of arrows and javelins broke loose. Anse saw two of his men fall—then Janazik had slammed the heavy outer valve and dogged it shut.

"Ellen!" he gasped. "Ellen—take the boat up before they dynamite it!"

The girl nodded. She was strapping herself into the pilot's seat before the gleaming control panel. Only Alonzo was there with her, bleeding but still on his feet. Four of them survived—only four—but they had the boat!

Through the viewport, Anse saw the attackers surging around the hull. They'd use ballistae to crush it, dynamite to blow it up, blaster cannon to fry them alive inside the metal shell—unless they got it into the sky first.

"Take the engines, Alonzo," said Ellen.

Gonzales Alonzo nodded. "You help me, Janazik," he said. "I'm not sure I—can stay conscious—"

THE PILOT ROOM was in the bows.

Behind it, bulkheaded off, lay the air plant and the other mechanisms for maintaining life aboard—not very extensive, for the boat wouldn't be in space long. Amidships were the control gyros, and behind still another bulkhead the engine controls. Rather than install an elaborate automatic feed system, the builders had relied on manual controls acting on light signals flashed by the pilot. It was less efficient, but it had shortened the labor of constructing the vessel and was good enough for the mere hop it had to make.

"I don't know anything about it," said Janazik doubtfully.

"I'll tell you what to do—Help me—"

Leaning on the Khazaki's arm, Alonzo stumbled toward the stern.

Anse strapped his big body into the chair beside Ellen's. "I can't help much, I'm afraid," he said.

"No—except by being here," she smiled.

Looking out, he saw that the assault on the castle was almost over—beaten off. It had provided the diversion they needed—but at what cost, at what cost?

"We might as well take off for the Star Ship right away," he said.

"Of course. And that will end the war. Volakech can either surrender or sit in the castle till he rots."

"Or we can use the ship to blast the citadel."

"No—oh, Cosmos, no!" Her eyes were filled with sudden horror.

"Why not?" he argued angrily. "Only way we can rescue our people if he won't give them up of his own will."

"We might kill Carse," she whispered.

It was on his tongue to snap good riddance, but he choked down the impulse. "Why do you care for him that much?"

"He's my brother," she said simply, and he realized that in spite of her civilized protestations Ellen was sufficiently Khazaki to feel the primitive unreasoning clan loyalty of the planet. She added slowly: "And when Father died, years ago, Carse took his place, he's been both father and big brother to me. He may have some wrong ideas, but he's always been so—good—"

A child's worship of the talented, handsome, genial elder brother, and she had never really outgrown it. Well—it didn't matter. Once they had the Star Ship, Carse didn't matter. "He'll be as safe as anyone can be in these days," said Anse. "I—I'll protect him myself if need be."

Her hand slid into his, and she kissed him, there in the little boat while it rocked and roared under the furious assaults from without. "Anyone who hurts Carse is my blood foe," she breathed. "But anyone who helps him helps me, and—and—"

Anse smiled, dreamily. The engines began to stutter, warming up, and Volakech's men scattered in dismay. They had seen the fire that spurted from the rocket tubes.

And in the engine room, Masefield Carson held his blaster leveled on Alonzo and Janazik. "Go ahead," he smiled. "Go ahead—take the ship up."

VI

THE KHAZAKI SWORE LIVIDLY.

His sword seemed almost to leap halfway out of the scabbard. Carse swung the blaster warningly, and he clashed the weapon back. Useless, useless, when white flame could destroy him before he got moving.

"How did you get here?" he snarled.

The tall, bronze-haired man smiled again. "I wasn't in the fight," he said. "Volakech wanted to save my knowledge

and told me to stay out of the battle. I wasn't really needed. But it occurred to me that your assault was obviously a futile gesture unless you hoped in some way to capture the boat. So I hid in here to guard it—just in case. And now—we'll take her up. We may just as well do so. Once I have the Star Ship—" He gestured at Alonzo. "Start the engines. And no tricks. I understand them as well as you do."

Gonzales strapped himself in place and stood swaying with weakness while he manipulated the controls. "I can't—reach that wheel—" he gasped.

"Turn it, Janazik," said Carse. "About a quarter turn—that's enough."

The impassive faces of meters wavered and blurred before Alonzo's swimming eyes. He had been pretty badly hurt. But the engines were warming up.

"Strap yourself in, Janazik," said Carse.

The Khazaki obeyed, sickly. He didn't really need the anti-acceleration webbing—Carse himself was content to hang on to a stanchion with one hand—but it would hamper his movements, he would have no way of making a sudden leap. Between them, he and Alonzo could handle the engines readily enough, Carse giving them their orders. Then once they were at the Star Ship he could blast them down, go out to capture Anse and Ellen—and the old books said one man could handle the ship if necessary—

How to warn the two in the pilot room? How to get help? The warrior's brain began to turn over, cool and steady now, swift as chilled lightning.

The boat spouted flame, stood on its tail and climbed for the sky. Acceleration dragged at Carse, but it wasn't too great for a strong man to resist. Carse tightened his grip on the stanchion. His blaster was steady on them.

Ellen's signal lights blinked and blinked on the control panels. More on the No. 3 jet, ease to port, full ahead, cut No. 2 . . . Alonzo handled most of it, occasionally gasping a command to Janazik. The bellow of the rockets filled the engine room.

And in the bows, Dougald Anson saw the world reel and fall behind, saw the rainy sky open up in a sudden magnificence of sun, saw it slowly darken and the stars come awesomely out. Gods, gods,

was this space? Open space? No wonder the old people had longed to get away!

* * *

How to get help, how to warn Anse— Janazik's mind spun like an unloaded engine, spewing forth plan after unusable plan. Quickly, now, by Shantuzik's hells!

No way out—and the minutes were fleeing, the rocket was reaching for the sky, he knew they were nearing the Star Ship and still he lay in his harness like a sheep and obeyed Carse's gun-point orders!

The disgrace of it! He snarled his anger, and at Alonzo's gasped command swung the wheel with unnecessary savagery. The ship lurched as a rocket tube overfired. Carse nearly lost his hold, and for an instant Janazik's hands were at the acceleration webbing, ready to fling it off and leap at him.

The man recovered, and his blaster came to the ready again. He had to shout to be heard above the thundering jets: "Don't try that—either of you! I can shoot you down and handle it myself if I must!"

He laughed then, a tall and splendid figure standing strained against the brutal, clawing acceleration. Ellen's brother—aye! And one could see why she wanted him spared. Janazik's lip curled back from his teeth in a snarl of hate.

THE ROCKET must be very near escape velocity now. Presently Ellen would signal for the jets to be turned off and they would rush weightless through space while she took her readings and plotted the orbit that would get them to the Star Ship. And if then Carse emerged with his blaster—

Anse had only a sword.

But—Anse is Anse, thought Janazik. If there is any faintest glimmer of a chance Anse will find it. And if not, we're really no worse off than now. I'll have to warn Anse and leave the rest up to him.

The Khazaki nodded bleakly to himself. It would probably mean his own death before Carse's blaster flame—and damn it, damn it, he liked living. Even if the old Khazak he knew were doomed, there had been many new worlds of the Galactic frontier. He and Anse had often dreamed of roving over them—

However—

A red light blinked on the panel. Ellen's signal to cut the rockets. They were at escape velocity.

Wearily, his hand shaking, Alonzo threw the master switch. The sudden silence was like a thunderclap.

And Janazik's screeched the old Kra-kenauai danger call from his fullest lungs.

Carse turned around with a curse, awkward in the sickening zero-gravity of free fall. "It won't do you any good," he yelled thickly. "I'll kill him too—"

Alonzo threw the master switch up! With a coughing roar, the rockets burst back into life. No longer holding the station, Carse was hurled to the floor.

Janazik clawed at his webbing to get free. Carse leveled his blaster on Alonzo. The engineer threw another switch at random, and the direction of acceleration shifted with sudden violence, slamming Carse against the farther wall.

His blaster raved, and Alonzo had no time to scream before the flame licked about him.

And in the control room, Anse heard Janazik's high ululating yell. The reflexes of the wandering years came back to galvanize him. His sword seemed to leap into his hand, he flung himself out of his chair webbing with a shout . . .

"Anse!" Ellen's voice came dimly to his ears, hardly noticed. "Anse—what is it—"

He drifted weightless in midair, cursing, trying to swim. And then the rockets woke up again and threw him against the floor. He twisted with Khazaki agility, landed crouched, and bounded for the stern.

Ellen looked after him, gasping, for an instant yet unaware of the catastrophe, thinking how little she knew that yellow-maned savage after all, and how she would like to learn, and—

The rocket veered, crazily. Anse caught himself as he fell, adjusted to the new direction of gravity, and continued his plunging run. The crash of a blaster came from ahead of him.

He burst into the control room and saw it in one blinding instant. Alonzo's charred body sagging in its harness, Janazik half out of his, Carse staggering to his feet—the blaster turned on Janazik, Janazik, the finger tightening—

TIGER-LIKE, ANSE SPRANG. Carse glimpsed him, turned, the blaster half swung about . . . and the murderous fighting machine which was 'Dougald Anson had reached him. Carse saw the sword shrieking against his face; it was the last thing he ever saw . . .

Anse lurched back against the control panel "Turn it off!" yelled Janazik. "Throw that big switch there!"

Mechanically, the human obeyed, and there was silence again, a deep ringing silence in which they floated free. It felt like an endless falling.

Falling, falling—Anse looked numbly down at his bloody sword. Falling, falling, falling—but that couldn't be right, he thought dully. He had already fallen. He had killed Ellen's brother.

"And I love her," he whispered.

Janazik drifted over, slowly in the silent room. His eyes were a deep gold, searching now. *If Ellen won't have him, he and I will go out together, out to the stars and the great new frontier. But if she will, I'll have to go alone, I'll always be alone—*

Unless she would come too. She's a good kid . . . I'd like to have her along. Maybe take a mate of my own too . . . But that can never be, now. She won't come near her brother's slayer.

"You might not have had to kill him," said Janazik "Maybe you could have disarmed him."

"Not before he got one of us—probably you," said Anse tonelessly. "Anyway, he needed killing. He shot Alonzo."

He added, after a moment: "A man has to stand by his comrades."

Janazik nodded, very slowly. "Give me your sword," he said.

"Eh?" Anse looked at him. The blue eyes were unseeing, blind with pain, but he handed over the red weapon. Janazik slipped his own glaive into the human's fingers.

Then he laid a hand on Anse's shoulder and smiled at him, and then looked away.

We Khazaki don't know love. There is comradeship, deeper than any Earthling knows. When it happens between male and

female, they are mates. When it is between male and male, they are blood-brothers. And a man must stand by his comrades.

Ellen came in, pulling her way along the walls by the handholds, and Anse looked at her without saying a word, just looking.

"What happened?" she said. "What is the—Oh!"

Carse's body floated in midair, turning over and over in air currents like a drowned man in the sea.

"Carse—Carse—"

Ellen pushed from the wall, over to the dead man. She looked at his still face, and stroked his blood-matted hair, and smiled through a mist of tears.

"You were always good to me, Carse," she whispered. "You were . . . goodnight, brother. Goodnight."

Then turning to Anse and Janazik, with something cold and terrible in her voice: "Who killed him?"

Anse looked at her, dumbly.

"I did," said Janazik.

He held forth the dripping sword. "He stowed away—was going to take over the ship. Alonzo threw him off balance by turning the rockets back on. He killed Alonzo. Then I killed him. He needed it. He was a traitor and a murderer, Ellen."

"He was my brother," she whispered. And suddenly she was sobbing in Anse's arms, great racking sobs that seemed to tear her slender body apart.

But she'd get over it.

Anse looked at Janazik over her shoulder, and while he ruffled her shining hair his eyes locked with the Khazaki's. *This is the end. Once we land, we can never see each other, not ever again. And we were comrades in the old days . . .*

Farewell, my brother.

WHEN THE STAR SHIP landed outside Krakenau's surrendered citadel, it was still raining a little. Janazik looked out at the wet gray world and shivered. Then, wordlessly, he stepped from the airlock and walked slowly down the hill toward the sea. He did not look back, and Anse did not look after him.

STRANGE EXODUS

By ROBERT ABERNATHY

Gigante, mindless, the Monsters had come out of interstellar space to devour Earth. They gnawed at her soil, drank deep of her seas. Where, on this gutted cosmic carcass, could humanity flee?

Illustrated by McWILLIAMS



Thus began for him a weird existence—the life of a parasite, of a flea on a dog.

WESTOVER GOT A SHOCK when he stumbled onto the monster, for all that he knew one had been through here.

He had been following the high ground toward the hills, alternately splashing through waist-deep water and climbing onto comparatively dry knolls. To right and

left of him was the sullen noise of the river in flood, and behind him, too, the rising water he had barely escaped. The night was overcast, the moon a faint disk of glow that left river and hills and even the mud underfoot invisible.

He had not sought in his mind for the flood's cause, but had merely taken it numbly as part of the fury and confusion of a world in ruin. Anyway, he was dead tired, out on his feet.

He sensed more than saw the looming wall before him, but he thought it the bare ledge-rock of a stripped hillside until he stepped into a small pot-hole and lurched forward, and his outflung hands sank into the slime that covered a surface faintly, horrifyingly resilient.

He recoiled as if seared, and retreated, slithering in the muck. For moments his mind was full of dark formless panic; then he took a firm hold on himself and tried to comprehend the situation.

Nothing was distinguishable beyond a few yards, but his mind's eye could see the rest—the immense slug-like shape that extended in ponderous repose across the river valley, its head and tail spilling over the hills on either side, five miles apart. The beast was quiescent until morning—sleeping, if such things slept.

And that explained the flood; the monster's body had formed an unbreakable dam behind which the river had been steadily piling up in those first hours of night; if it did not move until dawn, the level would be far higher then.

Westover stood motionless in the blackness; how long, he did not know. He was hardly aware of the water that covered his feet, crept over his ankles, and swirled halfway to his knees. Only the emergence of the moon through a rift of the cloud blanket brought him awake; its dim light gleamed all around on a great sheet of water, unbroken save for scattered black hummocks—crests of knolls like that on which he stood, all soon to be hidden by the rising flood.

For a moment he knew despair. The way back was impassable, and the way ahead was blocked by the titanic enemy.

Then the impersonal will that had driven him implacably two days and nights without stopping came to his rescue. Westover plodded forward, pressed his shrink-

ing body against the slimy, faintly warm surface of the monster's foot, and sought above him with upstretched hands—found holds, and began to climb with a strength he had not known was left in him.

The moonlight's fading again was merciful as he climbed the sheer, slippery face of the foot; but he could hear the wash and chuckle of the flood below. His tired brain told him treacherously: "I'm already asleep—this is a nightmare." Once, listening to that insidious voice, he slipped and for instants hung dizzily by his hands, and for some minutes after he had found a new foothold merely clung panting with pounding heart.

Some time after he had found courage to resume the climb, he dragged himself, gasping and quivering, to comparative safety on the broad shelf that marked the rim of the foot. Above him lay the great black steep that rose to the summit of the monster's humped back, a mountain to be climbed. Westover felt poignantly that his exhausted body could not make that ascent and face the long and dangerous descent beyond, which he had to make before dawn . . . but not now . . . not now. . . .

HE LAY IN A STATE between waking and dreaming, high on the monster's side; and it seemed that the colossal body moved, swelling and sighing—but he knew they did not breathe as backboned animals do. Westover had been one of the men who, in the days when humanity was still fighting, had accumulated quite a store of knowledge about the enemy—the enemy that was brainless and toolless, but that was simply too vast for human intelligence and weapons to defeat . . .

Westover no longer saw the murky moonlight, the far faint glitter of the flood or the slope of the living mountain. He saw, as he had seen from a circling jet plane, an immense tree of smoke that rose and expanded under the noonday sun, creamy white above and black and oily below, and beneath the black cloud something that writhed and flowed sluggishly in a cyclopean death agony.

That picture dissolved, and was replaced by the face of a man—one who might now be alive or dead, elsewhere in the

chaos of a desolated planet. It was an ordinary face, roundish, spectacled, but etched now by tragedy; the voice that went with it was flat, unemotional, pedantic.

"There are so many of them, and we've destroyed so few—and to kill those few took our mightiest weapons. Examination of the ones that have been killed discloses the reason why ordinary projectiles and bombs and poisons are ineffective against them—apart, that is, from the chief reason of sheer size. The creatures are so loosely organized that a local injury hardly affects the whole. In a sense, each one of them is a single cell—like the slime molds, the Earthly life forms that most resemble them.

"That striking resemblance, together with the fact that they chose Earth to attack out of all the planets of the Solar System, shows they must have originated on a world much like this. But while on Earth the slime molds are the highest reticular organisms, and the dominant life is all multicellular, on the monsters' home world conditions must have favored unicellular growth. Probably as a result of this unspecialized structure, the monsters have attained their great size and perhaps for the same reason they have achieved what even intelligent cellular life so far hasn't—liberation from existence bound to one world's surface, the conquest of space. They accomplished it not by invention but by adaptation, as brainless life once crawled out of the sea to conquer the dry land.

"The monsters who have descended on Earth must represent the end result of a long evolution completed in space itself. They are evidently deep-space beings, able to propel themselves from planet to planet and from star to star in search of food, guided by instinct to suns and worlds like ours. Descending on such a planet, they move across its surface systematically ingesting all edible material—all life not mobile enough to avoid their march. They are like caterpillars that overrun a planet and strip it of its leaves, before moving on to the next.

"Man is a highly mobile species, so our direct casualties of this invasion have been very light and will continue to be. But when the monsters have finished with

Earth, there will be no vegetation left for man's food, no houses, no cities, none of the fixed installations of civilization, and the end will be far more terrible than if we were all devoured by the monsters."

WESTOVER AWOKE, feeling himself bathed by the cold sweat of nightmare—then he realized that a misty rain had wetted his face and sogged his clothes. That, and the sleep he had had, refreshed him and made his mind clearer than it had been for days, and he remembered that he could not sleep but had to go on, searching with a hope that would not die for some miraculously spared refuge where civilization and science might yet exist, where there would be the means to realize his idea for stopping the monsters.

He sat up, eyes searching the sky for a sign to tell him how long he had slept. Low on the western horizon he found the faint glow that told of the moon's setting; and in the east a stronger light was already struggling through the clouds and mist, becoming every moment less tenuous and illusory, more the bitter reality of the breaking day.

Even as Westover began frantically climbing, out of that lightening sky the hopelessness of his effort pressed down on him. With dawn the monster would begin to move, to crawl eastward impelled by the same dim phototropic urge which must guide these things out of the interstellar depths to Sun-type stars. All of them had crept endlessly eastward around the Earth, gutting the continents and churning the sea bottoms, and by now whatever was left of human civilization must be starving beyond the Arctic circle, or aboard ships at sea. The hordes that still lived and wandered over the once populous fertile lands, like this—would not live long.

For a man like Westover, who had been a scientist, it was not the prospect of death that was most crushing, but the death blow to his human pride, the star-storming pride of mind and will—defeated by sheer bulk and mindless hunger.

Near the crest of the monster's back, he stumbled and fell hands and knees on the shagreen-roughness of the skin; at first he thought only that an attack of dizziness had made him fall, then he realized

that the surface beneath him had shifted. Unmistakably even in the misty dawn-light, the hills and valleys of the rugose back were changing shape, as the vast protoplasmic mass below crawled, flowed beneath its integument. In slow peristaltic motion the waves marched eastward, toward the monster's head.

He could stay where he was unharmed, of course. On the monster's back, of all places, he had nothing to fear from it or from others of its kind. But he knew with desperate clarity that by nightfall, when the beast became still once more, exhaustion and growing hunger would have made him unable to descend. As he lay where he had fallen, he felt that weakness creeping over him, no longer held in check by the will that had kept him doggedly plodding forward.

Again he lay half conscious, in a lethargy that unchecked must grow steadily deeper until death. Isolated thoughts floated through his head. It occurred to him that he was now ideally located to conduct the experiments necessary to prove his theory of how to destroy the monsters—if only someone had had the foresight to build a biological laboratory on the monster's back. Of course the rolling motion would create special problems of technique. . . Idiocy. . . Once more he seemed to glimpse Sutton's face, as the biologist calmly made that grisly report to the President's Committee on Extermination . . . Sutton's prediction had been a hundred percent correct. The monsters' hunger knew no halt until they had absorbed into themselves all the organic material on the world which was their prey. . . And men must starve, as he was starving now. . .

WITH A STRUGGLE Westover roused himself, first sitting up, then swaying to his feet, frowning with the effort to look sanely at the terrible inspiration that had come to him. The cloud blanket was breaking up, the sun already high, beating down on the naked moving plateau on which the man stood. The idea born in him seemed to stand that light, even to expand into hope.

Fingers shaking, he unhitched the light ax from his belt and began to hack with feverish industry at the monster's crusted hide.

The scaly, weathered epidermis seemed immeasurably thick. But at last he had chopped through it, reached the softer protoplasm beneath. Clawing and hewing in the hole he had made, he tore out heavy slabs of the monster's flesh.

A ripple that did not belong to the crawling motion ran over the thing's surface round about. Westover laughed wildly with a sudden sense of power. He, the insignificant human mite, had made the miles-long beast twitch like a flea-bitten dog.

The analogy was pat; like a flea, he had lodged on a larger animal and was about to nourish himself from it. The slabs of flesh he had cut off were gray and unappetizing, but he knew from the studies he had helped Sutton make that the monsters, extraterrestrial though they were, were in the basic chemistry of proteins, fats and carbohydrates one with man or the amoeba, and therefore might be—food.

His matches were dry in their waterproof case; he made a smoldering fire from the loose fibrous scale of the monster's back, and half an hour later was replete. Either the long fast, or involuntary revulsion, or perhaps merely the motion of the creature brought on nausea, but he fought it sternly back and succeeded in keeping his strange meal down. Then he was tormented by thirst. It was some time, though, before he could bring himself to drink the colorless fluid that had collected in the wound he had inflicted on the monster.

Thus began for him a weird existence—the life of a parasite, of a flea on a dog. The monster crawled by day and rested by night; strengthened, the man could have left it then, but somehow night after night he did not. It wasn't, he argued with himself sometimes in the days when he lay torpidly drowsing, lulled by the long sway, arms over his head to protect him from the sun's baking, merely that he was chained to the only source of food he knew in all the world—not just that he was developing a flea's psychology. He was a man and a scientist, and he was conducting an experiment. . . His life on the monster's back was proving something, something of vast importance for man, the extinct animal—but for increasingly longer periods of time he could not remember

what it was. . . .

There came a morning, though, when he remembered.

HE WOKE with the sun's warmth on his body and the realization of something amiss trickling through his head. It was a little while before he recognized the wrongness, and when he did he sat bolt upright.

The sun was already up, and the monster should have begun once more its steady, ravenous march to the east. But there was no motion; the great living expanse lay still around him. He wondered wildly if it was dead.

Presently, though, he felt a faint shuddering and lift beneath his feet, and heard far stifled mutterings and sighs.

Westover's mind was beginning to function again; it was as though the cessation of the rock and sway had exorcised the lethargy that had lain upon him. He knew now that he had been almost insane for the time he had passed here, touched by the madness that takes hermits and men lost in deserts or oceans. And his was a stranger solitude than any of those.

Now he listened strainingly to the portentous sounds of change in the monster's vitals, and in a flash of insight knew them for what they were. The scientists had found, in the burst bodies of the Titans that had been killed by atomic bombs, the answer to the riddle of these creatures' crossing of space: great vacuoles, pockets of gas that in the living animal could be under exceedingly high pressures, and that could be expelled to drive the monster in flight like a reaction engine. Rocket propulsion, of course, was nothing new to zoology; it was developed ages before man, by the squids and by those odd degenerate relatives of the vertebrates that are called tunicates because of their gaudy cellulose-plastic armor. . . .

The monster on which Westover had been living as a parasite was generating gases within itself, preparing to leave the ravished Earth. That was the meaning of its gargantuan belly rumblings. And they meant further that he must finally leave it—now or never—or be borne aloft to die gasping in the stratosphere.

Hurriedly the man scrambled to the highest eminence of the back and stood

looking about; and what he saw brought him to the brink of despair. For all around lay blue water, waves dancing and glinting in the fresh breeze; and sniffing the air he recognized the salt tang of the sea. While he slept the monster had crept beyond the coast line, and lay now in what to it was shallow water—fifty or a hundred fathoms. Back the way it had come, a headland was visible, mockingly, hopelessly distant.

Of course—the great beast would crawl into the sea, which would float its bloated bulk and enable it to accelerate and take flight. It would never have been able to lift itself into the air from the dry land.

He should have foreseen that and made his escape in time. Now that he had solved the problem of human survival. . . But the bright ocean laughed at him, sparkling away wave beyond rolling wave, and beyond that blue headland could be only a land made desert, where men become beasts fought crazily over the last morsels of food. He had lost track of the days he had been on the monster's back, but the rape of Earth must be finished now. He had no doubt that the things would depart as they had come into the Solar System—in that close, seemingly one-willed swarm that Earth's astronomers had at first taken for a comet. If this one was leaving, the rest no doubt were too.

Westover sat for a space with head in hands, hearing the faint continuing murmurs from below. And he remembered the voices.

HE HAD BEEN HEARING them again as he awoke—the distant muffled voices whose words he could not make out, not the small close ones that sometimes in the hot middays had spoken clearly in his ear and even called his name. The latter had to be, as he had vaguely accepted them even then, illusions—but the others—with his new clarity he was suddenly sure that they had been real.

And a wild, white light of hope blazed in him, and he flung himself flat on the rough surface, beat on it with bare fists and shouted: "Help! Here I am! Help!"

He paused to listen with fierce intentness, and heard nothing but the faint eruptions deep inside the monster.

Then he sprang to his feet, gripping

his hand-ax, and ran panting to the place where he had dug for food. His excavations tended to close and heal overnight; now he went to work with vicious strokes enlarging the latest one, hacking and tearing it deeper and deeper.

He was almost hidden in the cavity when a shadow fell across him from behind. He whirled, for there could be no shadows on the monster's back.

A man stood watching him calmly—an elderly man in rusty black clothing, leaning on a stick. The staff, the snowy beard, and something that smoldered behind the benign eyes, gave him the look of an ancient prophet.

"Who are you?" asked Westover, breathlessly but almost without surprise. "I am the Preacher," the old man said. "The Lord hath sent me to save you. Arise, my son, and follow me."

Westover hesitated. "I'm not just imagining you?" he appealed. "Somebody else has really found the answer?"

The Preacher's brows knitted faintly, but then his look turned to benevolent understanding. "You have been alone too long here. Come with me—I will take you to the Doctor."

Westover was still not sure that the other was more than one of the powerful specters of childhood—the Preacher, the Doctor, no doubt the Teacher next—risen to rob him of his last shreds of sanity. But he nodded in childlike obedience, and followed.

When, a few hundred yards nearer the monster's head, the other halted at a black rent in the rugose hide, the mouth of a burrow descending into utter blackness—Westover knew that both the Preacher and his own wild hope were real.

"Down here. Into the belly of Leviathan," said the old man solemnly, and Westover nodded this time with alacrity.

THE CRAWLING DESCENT through the twisting, Stygian burrow had much that ought to belong to a journey into Hell. . . More than that, no demonologist's imagination could have conceived without experiencing the sheer horror of the yielding beslimed walls that seemed every moment squeezing in to trap them unspeakably. The air was warm and rank with the familiar heavy sweetish

odor of the monster's colorless blood. . .

Then, as he knew it must, a light glimmered ahead, the sinus widened, and Westover climbed to his feet and stood, weak-kneed still, staring at a chamber carved in the veritable belly of Leviathan. The floor underfoot was firm, as was the wall his shaking fingers tested. Dazzled, he saw tools leaning against the walls, spades, crowbars, axes, and a half-dozen people, men and women in rough grimy clothing, who stood watching him with lively interest.

The Preacher stood beside him, breathing hard and mopping his forehead. But he brushed aside the deferential offers of the others: "No—I will take him to the Doctor myself. All of you must hurry now to close the shaft."

There was another tunnel to be crawled through, but that one was firm-walled as the room they left behind. They emerged into a larger cavern, that like the first was lit—only now did the miracle of it obtrude itself in his dazed mind—by fluorescent tubes, and filled with equipment that gleamed glass and metal. Over an apparatus with many fluid-dripping trays, like an air-conditioning device, bent a lone man.

"Is it working?" inquired the Preacher.

"It's working," the other answered without looking up from the adjustment he was making. Bubbles were rising in the fluid that filled the trays, rising and bursting, rising and bursting with a curiously fascinating monotony. The subtly tense attitudes of the two initiates told Westover better than words that there was something hugely important in the success of whatever magic was producing those bubbles.

The thaumaturge straightened, wiping his hands on his trousers as he turned with a satisfied grin on his round, spectacled face—then both he and Westover froze in dumbfounded recognition.

SUTTON was first to recover. He said quietly, "Welcome aboard the ark, Bill. You're just in time—I think we're about to hoist anchor." His quick eyes studied Westover's face, and he gestured toward a packing box against the wall opposite his apparatus. "Sit down. You've been through the mill."

"That's right," Westover sat down diz-

zily. "I've been aboard your ark for some time now, though. Only as an ectoparasite."

"It's high time you joined the endoparasites. Lucky you scratched around enough up there to create repercussions we could feel down here. You got the same idea, then?"

"I stumbled onto it," Westover admitted.

"I was wandering across country—my plane crashed on the way back from that South American bug hunt dreamed up by somebody who'd been reading Wells' *War of the Worlds*. I think my pilot went nuts; you could see too much of the destruction from up there . . . But I got out in one piece and started walking—looking for some place with people and facilities that could try out my method of killing the monsters. I thought—I still think—I had a sure-fire way to do that—but I didn't realize then that it was too late to think of killing them off."

Sutton nodded thoughtfully. "It was too late—or too early, perhaps. We'll have to talk that over."

Westover finished the brief account of his coming to dwell on the monster's back. The other grinned happily.

"You began with the practice, where I worked out the theory first."

"I haven't got so far with the theory," said Westover, "but I think I've got the main outlines. Until the monsters came, man was a parasite on the face of the Earth. Fundamentally, parasitism—on the green plants and their by-products—was our way of life, as of all animals from the beginning. But the monsters absorbed into themselves all the plant food and even the organic material in the soil. So we have only one way out—to transfer our parasitism to the only remaining food source—the monsters themselves.

"The monsters almost defeated us, because of their two special adaptations of extreme size and ability to cross space. But man has always won the battle of adaptations before, because he could improvise new ones as the need arose. The greatest crisis humanity ever faced called for the most radical innovation in our way of life."

"Very well put," approved Sutton. "Except that you make it sound easy. By the time I'd worked it out like that, things

were already in such a turmoil that putting it into effect was the devil's own job. About the only ones I could find to help me were the Preacher and his people. They have the faith that moves mountains, that has made this self-moving mountain inhabitable."

"It is inhabitable?" Westover's question reflected no doubt.

SUTTON GESTURED at the bubbling device behind him. "That thing is making air now, which we're going to need when the monster's in space. It was when we were still trying to find a poison for the beasts that I hit on the catalyst that makes their blood give up its oxygen—that's its blood flowing through the filters. We've got an electric generator running by tapping the monster's internal gas pressure. There are problems left before we'll be fully self-sufficient here—but the monster is so much like us in fundamental makeup that its body contains all the elements human life needs too."

"Then," Westover glanced appreciatively around, "it looks like the main hazard is claustrophobia."

"Don't worry about a cave-in. We're surrounded by solid cystoid tissue. But," Sutton's voice took on a graver note, "there may be other psychological dangers. I don't think all our people—there are fifty-one, fifty-two of us now—realize yet that this colony isn't just a temporary expedient. Human history hasn't had such a turning-point since men first started chipping stone. Spengler's *Mensch als Raubtier*—if he ever existed—has to be replaced by the *Mensch als Schmarotzer*, and the adjustment may come hard. We've got to plan for the rest of our lives—and our children's and our children's children's—as parasites inside this monster and whatever others we can manage to—infect—when they're clustered again in space."

"For the future," put in the Preacher, who had watched benignly the biologists' reunion, "the Lord will provide, even as He did unto Jonah when he cried to Him out of the belly of the fish."

"Amen," agreed Sutton. But the gaze he fixed on Westover was oddly troubled. "Speaking of the future brings up the question of the idea you mentioned—your monster-killing scheme."

WESTOVER FLEXED his hands involuntarily, like one who has been too long enforcedly idle. In terse eager sentences he outlined for Sutton the plan that had burned in him during his bitter wandering over the face of the ruined land. It would be very easy to accomplish from an endoparasite's point of vantage, merely by isolating from the creature's blood over a long period enough of some potent secretion—hormone, enzyme or the like—to kill when suddenly reintroduced into the system. "Originally I thought we could accomplish the same thing by synthesis—but this way will be simpler."

"Beautifully simple," Sutton smiled wryly. "So much so that I wish you'd never thought of it."

Westover stared. "Why?"

"Describing your plan, you sounded almost ready to put it into effect on the spot."

"No! Of course I realize—Well, I see what you mean—I think." Westover was crestfallen.

Sutton smiled faintly.

"I think you do, Bill. To survive, we've got to be *good* parasites. That means before all, for the coming generations, that we keep our numbers down. A good parasite doesn't destroy or even overtax its host. We don't want to follow the sorry example of such unsuccessful species as the bugs of bubonic plague or typhoid; we'll do better to model ourselves on the humble tapeworm.

"Your idea is dangerous for the same reason. The monsters probably spend thousands of years in interstellar space; during that time they'll be living exclusively on their fat—the fuel they stored on Earth, and so will we. We've got a whole

new history of man ahead of us, under such changed conditions that we can't begin to predict what turns it may take. There's a very great danger that men will proliferate until they kill their hosts. But imagine a struggle for *Lebensraum* when all the living space there is is a few thousand monsters capable of supporting a very limited number of people each—with your method giving an easy way to destroy these little worlds our descendants will inhabit. It's too much dynamite to have around the house."

Westover bowed his head, but he had caught a curiously expectant glint in Sutton's eyes as he spoke. He thought, and his face lightened. "Suppose we work out a way to record my idea, one that can't be deciphered by anyone unintelligent enough to be likely to misuse it. A riddle for our descendants—who should have use for it some day."

At last Sutton smiled. "That's better. You've thought it through to the end, I see . . . This phase of our history won't last forever. Eventually, the monsters will come to another planet not too unlike Earth, because it's on such worlds they prey. A tapeworm can cross the Sahara desert in the intestine of a camel—"

His voice was drowned in a vast hissing roar. An irresistible pressure distorted the walls of the chamber and scythed its occupants from their feet. Sutton staggered drunkenly almost erect, fought his way across the tilting floor to make sure of his precious apparatus. He turned back toward the others, bracing himself and shouting something; then, knowing his words lost in the thunder, gestured toward the Earth they were leaving, a half-regretful, half-triumphant farewell.

HEY THERE!

don't forget that from NOW on . . .

▶ **IT'S PLANET EVERY OTHER MONTH!**
first BI-MONTHLY issue on sale SEPTEMBER 1

Old pilots like Pop Gillette weren't needed any more to run the big ships. Nowadays you were boosted and roosted by the grace of Gimmick. Sooner or later, Pop predicted, something was gonna louse up . . .



The heavy ship shuddered to a stop five feet above the ramp . . .

PATCH

THE WALL SPEAKER IN THE control tower was crackling softly with space static when the voice first cut in. "Lorelei calling Venusport

for landing. Over."

Even across ten thousand miles of space the sharp New England twang clearly showed the origin of its owner. Joe flicked

By WILLIAM SHEDENHELM

the transmitting stud and winked at the radar man.

"Venusport to Lorelei. Come on in, you old space pirate. Use Ramp Four. Out."

He glanced at the green spot on the radar sweep screen that was the Lorelei, entered a set of figures in the tower log, then leaned back in the chair in front of the control panels and lit a cigarette.

"That Pop," he said, nodding vaguely at the radar screen and the log book, "must be damn near two hundred years old, and he's still the best pilot in the System. Used to have the All-Planetary run back when it was really something. When they put in automatics for cruising it made him so mad he quit and never would go back. Said he wasn't going to let a bunch of machines run his ship, even out in space."

He blew a beam of smoke at the spot that moved slowly toward the center of the radar sweep screen.

"He bought the tub he calls the Lorelei at a surplus sale, and spends all his time battling around the odd corners of space that the Survey Patrol hasn't gotten to yet." Joe puffed his cigarette reminiscently for a minute. "I remember the first time I saw him land the Lorelei. Lord, what a sight. No one else has ever had the nerve to try it the way he does it, or at least lived to tell about it. I wonder if he's gotten too old to do it anymore."

The radar man stared at the faint speck that showed above the horizon, then brought it into magnified focus on the tele-screen.

"He's coming in awfully funny," he said.

Joe got up and stood staring out through the sides of the big plastic bubble that formed the walls and roof of the control tower.

"I think he's going to try it. Watch this!"

THE STUBBY OVALOID was angling in towards the Port from a little above horizontal, as though to make a belly landing. Just short of the field, the steering jets gave a tremendous side blast that whipped the ship into a tight upward arc. All the ship's jets winked out, and the ship whistled straight up for over a mile, began to slow, and dropped back in free fall. The ship dropped faster and

faster toward the concrete apron, tail first, its jets dead.

Two hundred feet above the ramp Pop Gillette hit the bank of firing buttons and hit it hard. The heavy ship shuddered to a stop five feet above the ramp, cracking the concrete with the fury of its rear jets, spinning like an enormous pin-wheel, its rotator jets gushing fire in hundred-yard sweeps.

Joe wiped the sweat from his forehead and dropped into his chair.

"Brother! Someday his tubes are going to misfire when he tries that, and the Lorelei is going to be spread from here to Marsport!"

The radar man did not answer immediately. He was still standing at the dome, his mouth slightly agape, staring at the stubby ship that now lay silent in Ramp Four. He pulled himself together, closed his mouth with a click, and moved back to the sweep screen.

"Who the hell is that guy?"

"You've heard of Pop Gillette. Everybody in space has. Anytime you want to tell a whopper about space, all you have to say is, 'I remember one time when Pop Gillette and me was out arounds so-and-so . . .' And whatever nutty place you name, he's probably really been there, and whatever nutty thing you can think of to happen, it probably really did happen to him."

The radar man nodded in recognition, and Joe went on.

"Like the time he got mad at the people at White Sands Port. One night he goosed an asteroid down right in the middle of their main landing strips. The damn thing was a quarter of a mile long, and almost as high. How he got it down through the atmosphere, nobody knows, but he did . . . and he landed it so gently that nobody knew anything about it until they looked out their windows the next morning. They finally got the Patrol on him, and told him the asteroid was legally his, so he had to think of a way to get rid of it. He did. Turned out to be laced with uranium, so he rented the whole darned field for a month, cut the thing up and carted it away. Sold it for a fortune."

The outer door of the ovaloid ship was now open, and as one of the Port's zeeps rolled alongside, a man, miniature

in the distance, slid down the ship's side-ladder and climbed aboard. Joe swung the directional p.a. at the zeep.

"Hey Pop . . . come on up!"

THE LITTLE FIGURE waved, and the zeep headed for the control tower. As it drew nearer they could begin to see Pop Gillette more clearly. He was a thin little man, deeply space tanned. He could have been anyplace from fifty to three hundred and fifty. He rode sitting on the rear edge of the speeding zeep, balanced precariously, calmly puffing a Venusian cigarote.

He came through the outer control rooms like a Martian whirlwind, spraying greetings and minor presents in all directions.

"Hi there, Tom. Saw your uncle out near Ganymede. Living with a Phobian Bat Woman . . .

"Hi there. Here's that gooloo bird's tail feather you asked for five or six years ago!" (It had been near twenty years ago, when the recipient was four years old.)

"Hello, Honey. You know that Nep-tunian Rock Egg you wanted? Got a couple in my ship as big as your head. Come up to the hotel for supper tonight and I'll give them to you!" He winked roguishly at Honey and whirled into the control room.

"Hi Joe, you landlocked lard-bottom. What have you been doing?" And before Joe could start to answer, he went on. "Had an unusual thing happen to me out on Pluto. I was out prospecting for liquid hydrogen wells when I sprung a leak in my oxygen tank. I got it fixed, but most of my oxy had leaked out. Had enough for fifteen, maybe twenty minutes, and the ship was two hours away. Thought I'd never make it. Finally started back with a load of icicles under my arm. Every few minutes I'd stop, break off a piece, and drop it into my tank. Turned out to be pure oxygen, frozen stiff!"

When Joe had regained his composure, he tossed a wink at the radar man, who was again standing with his mouth ajar.

"Say, Pop," Joe said with careful casualness. "All-Planetary's Mercury-Venus liner is coming in about oh-four-four."

Pop choked on a lungful of cigarote smoke, and, turning crimson through his space tan, glared at Joe.

"You better clear out of this tower, son. When that bunch of gears comes in, it's apt to take this whole side off the planet!"

Joe kept his face serious.

"I hear this is one of the new models," he said. "They only use the pilot for landings. Take-offs and cruising are all automatic."

Pop Gillette tossed his cigarote into the disposal in disgust.

"I wouldn't put it past that bunch of pants-brains to just point the things and light a fuse. Those young punks they have for pilots couldn't belly on the moon."

"But Pop," Joe said. "You're too old to work a liner even if they did go back to manuals."

Pop Gillette flashed red and purple, and glared at Joe.

"Too old! Do you know what I hit when I brought the Lorelei in just now? Fourteen damn G's! If she wasn't an old meteor patrol ship she'd crack open like an egg the way I handle her. Too old my space-warped rear!"

"But ships are bigger these days, Pop. When you were shoving them they couldn't have weighed over half a million tons. The one that's due this afternoon tops two million. That's a lot of ship."

Pop Gillette shook his head derisively at such ignorance, which was, after all, to be expected from a ground crew man.

"They're all the same. Once you have the feel of it," he rippled his fingers as though working a bank of firing keys, "it works anyplace. I run the Lorelei just like I used to run my liners. I can cut it a bit finer than I could a big ship, but otherwise it doesn't make any difference how big they come. I could stand that liner on her butt and write my name clean across that field." He jerked his head at the four-mile-wide Venusport, and glared at Joe and the radar man. "And cross the 't's' and dot the 'i's'!"

IT WAS AN HOUR LATER, while they were sitting around drinking Venusian wine, that the call came through. You always expect a distress call to be weak

and difficult to understand, but this one wasn't. It was as clear as though the transmitter were in the next room.

"Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! All-Planetary Liner Twelve calling Venusport! Over!"

At the first sound of the universal distress call, Joe and the radar man went into action. Joe hit a red stud that alerted all the units at the Port, and cut in the speakers in the other control sections, while the radar man got a rough bearing on the liner, and switched up the amplification until he had the ship located within a foot, and its speed and course plotted to five decimal places.

All this in the time it took the first call to come through. Joe flipped the transmitting stud.

"Venusport to All-Planetary Twelve. All other units clear the air immediately. Come in."

The voice cut in sharply through the space static again, sounding a little frightened and tense.

"All-Planetary Twelve calling Venusport. Something went wrong with the radar deflectors. We took a meteor through the control room. Luckily it just clipped us, but it put a ten foot hole in the side. The man on duty got out okay, but we lost all the air in that section. We can't bring her in with that hole in her. We have to have air in the control room, or all the switches are out. Over."

Outside, the control tower ships were being moved out of the way, back into the hangars and into the pits. Blinker lights and radio landing beams were flickering out "Stay Clear!" warnings to all ships in that segment of space. Joe flipped the stud again.

"Is the hole too big for a plastic patch? Over."

"It's a good ten feet across. We haven't got any patches that big, and even if we did have, they wouldn't do any good. Once we pumped the air back in, the pressure would boot the patch out into space. The only thing that will work is a welding job. Over."

Joe shook his head glumly and flipped the stud.

"We've got enough monalloy here to fix it, but we haven't got a portable welding outfit that could handle the job. Down

here we could have it fixed in half an hour. Over."

There was a pause before the voice came back.

"That's a lot of help. Over."

POP GILLETTE tugged at Joe's sleeve. Joe started to shake him loose, but stopped when he felt the old man's grip tighten on his arm like a space grapple.

"Let me have that thing," he said. He took the mike from Joe and flipped the stud.

"Hey there! What's your cargo?"

The speaker was silent for a moment, other than for the faint crackle of the space static. Then the voice cut in again, a little more resigned than before, as it rattled off the list of cargo.

"Let's see. We've got twenty tons of unrefined uranium from Titan, fifty thousand gallons of mercury from Gany, and twenty tons of canned wooklah meat from Jupe. At least we can live on wooklah meat on our way to Alpha Centauri." He laughed nervously. "Boy, is All-Planetary going to be mad, at a hundred bucks a can. Over."

Pop Gillette scratched his chin reflectively. Finally he shook his head in disgust.

"I could have told that bunch of fat-headed clod-lubbers they couldn't trust a bunch of machinery. If they'd of had a pilot watching the screens instead of some half-baked crewman, this wouldn't have happened. Easiest thing in the world to blast around a meteor, but try to tell that to *that* bunch." He spat in disgust. "I swore I'd never lift a hand for All-Planetary again as long as I lived, but now I guess I'll have to go up and fix that damned liner. First vacation I've had in five years and I have to play nursemaid to a bunch of half-wits!"

He glared at Joe. "Well, are you coming or aren't you?"

Joe looked at him blankly.

Pop Gillette shook his head sadly at the mental level of Venusport's personnel.

"Somebody's got to bring the Lorelei back down, don't they? Lord, the people they put in responsible positions these days. . . . Come on! Get the cadmium out!" And he was halfway down the stairs before Joe was on his feet.

"And bring a roll of scotch tape!" he shouted back.

What happened after that is pretty well a matter of the records. Every telecast carried the report for days. Pop Gillette got aboard the liner by bringing the Lorelei alongside. Then, with Joe holding her steady as she went, Pop jumped across the twenty feet of open space, scotch tape in his space suit pocket, to the liner's open port.

Then he brought the liner down for a tail landing, as pretty as you please.

IT WAS TEN MINUTES later that Pop Gillette and Joe sat drinking their Venusian wine again, watching the ground crews welding a new plate on the liner, a mile away across the Port.

"But how did you do it?" Joe asked. "And why the scotch tape?"

Pop Gillette deftly poured a tumbler of wine down his throat and reached for the bottle.

"Simplest thing in the world. I used the

tape to stick a couple of bed sheets over the hole, inside and out."

Joe stared at him in puzzlement.

"Bedsheets? What for?"

Pop Gillette cast his eyes heavenwards as for deliverance. "I'm sure glad I don't run a liner anymore. I might get somebody like you for a co-pilot. I had to have a *mold*, didn't I? You heard the pilot say the patch had to be metal to stand the pressure. Fifteen pounds to the inch over a ten foot patch is a lot of pressure. Well, after I had the sheets over the hole, I turned it towards the sun, filled the mold, and turned it around away from the sun. The temperature drop in space did the rest."

Joe put his hand to his brow and glanced at his wine glass suspiciously. "I vaguely get what you're talking about, but just *what* did you make the patch out of?"

Pop Gillette chuckled wryly.

"The mercury, of course. Froze hard as steel when I turned her away from the sun. Perfect fit, too."

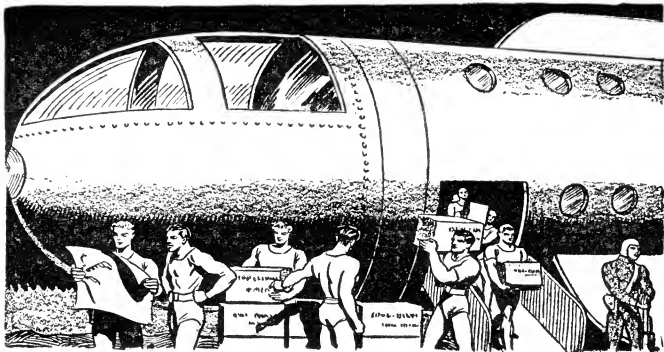
IN THE NEXT ISSUE...

★
MITKEY!

FREDERIC BROWN'S FAMOUS
STARMOUSE



RETURNS IN THE NOVEMBER **PLANET STORIES**



THE VIZIGRAPH

There's so much to tell you this issue that we'll just start the ball rolling and duck out:

- 1) Starting with the next issue PLANET will appear bi-monthly, satisfying a long-standing yowl from you faithful fen... We figure if Velikovsky can slow down a planet, we can speed one up! And, kidding aside, we're darned grateful here at PS for the solid reader-support that encouraged us to make this move. Thanks to you, and you too... from now on, it's PLANET every other month!
- 2) Attention, Vizigrippers: PLANET's new address is 130 W. 42nd St., New York 18, N. Y. Try to get your letters off within a week or so after PS goes on the stands, huh? A lot of good stuff is squeezed out of La Viz, simply because it hits our desk about the same time as do the advance copies, soggy from the press, of the PS in which it might have appeared. The bi-monthly issuance will cut this even finer, so get the lead out...and incidentally, the more mail we get, the better job we can do. Yah, come on, all you associate editors!
- 3) There's a story in this issue which we think deserves a loud fanfare: THE SKY IS FALLING by C. H. Liddell. Once in a very long while the lucky editor receives a manuscript cold, with no "big name" appended, that lifts him up off his blasé back-side with a whoop. THE SKY IS FALLING is such a story. Mr. Liddell writes with uncommon power and clarity; more, his work is most wonderfully unjaudged. You PS readers who've had psychological training... opinions, please.
- 4) There's been a lot of holler about covers. Well, the babe-brawn-Bem cover is here to stay, see? We like it, see? *C'est tout!*
- 5) The announcement on p. 97 speaks for itself. Better practise a few screams of glee before looking.

- 6) And how do you like PLANET's new look?
- 7) By way of a post script to Ray Ramsay, who suggested a story on the scientific aspects of reproduction... try MEEM, in this issue, Ray. We strive to please.

So, to the pic awards. Remember, winners choose illustrations from the issue in which their letters appeared, *not* the issue they roasted or the issue which announces their winnership. First place winner chooses only one, and gets it. Winner number two chooses two, in order of preference, because No. 1 is likely to choose 2's 1st choice, leaving 2 his 2nd choice. No. 3 picks 3 pics, so that after 1 who won 1 has made off with it and 2 has chosen 2 but gotten only 1 too, there'll be something left for someone. Don't ask us who.

First, place and show are: Robert Silverberg; Marion Zimmer Bradley; Al Weinstein.

JEROME BIXBY

NO SACRIFICE TOO GREAT

Stanford, California

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

Now that PLANET is no longer in the hands of PLP, I'm taking the liberty of writing with a few suggestions. Of course, Payne paid no attention to my pleas—and I've no real hope that you will, either. However, read on—

First, the covers. Anderson should really be put out to pasture. And don't get Bergey—he's even worse. Hire Timmins, Rogers or Canedo. Or Finlay. *Toujours Finlay!* (*Threejours Anderson!* —Ed.) In general, the interior artwork is good. A few turkeys, but by and large okay. One thing, though. Tell the artists to quit trying to sex up the stories and stick to the script. I love flesh as well as the next one, but let's have a little accuracy.

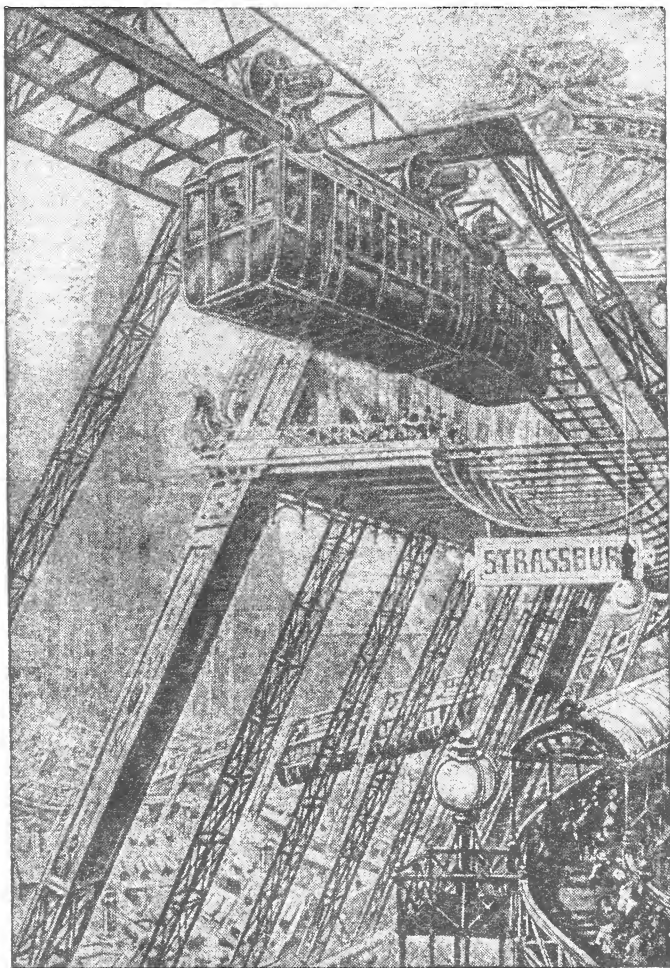


Photo Schoenfeld

Figure 1000, Figure 1001

AN INTERESTING bit of scientifictioniana, gang . . . an imaginative artist—name unknown—neatly prophesies suspended mono-railroads; the year . . . 1906! A municipal system of this type was inaugurated in Wupperthal, Germany, just before World War I, but the idea didn't spread. Too bad.

The brush-pushers might even read the stories before illustrating them. I realize this is a radical suggestion that will probably get me investigated by Congress, but in the interests of a good PLANET—no sacrifice is too great!

Now the writers. Point one—Bradbury. It has gotten to the point now that anything Ray chooses to palm off on the readers automatically stimulates raves. This is a sad state of affairs. We have suffered through his Martian Period, and now are about to be subjected to a stream of tales about *kaptu* authors among the stars. Bradbury is at his scintillating best in his tales of those hair-raising children he used to write about. He has never approached the skill and feeling that went into his *HOME COMING*—a story that had everything. Pathos, grace, irony and a real style. *ZERO HOUR* was excellent. But these last few things of his have been hackneyed and badly done. Let Ray return to the things he does well and have the good taste to leave Tom Wolfe, Poe, and company alone and in peace. If this be treason, make the best of it.

I am glad to see new writers appearing always in Planet. It is a real pleasure to watch from afar, as it were, the growth of a newcomer in the field. Coppel, for example, is getting better with each issue. His first piece—that horror about a jinx ship—was about as hack as they come. The second in the series (?), *THE STARBUSTERS*, was better, but still far from good. Then came *RUNAWAY* and *CAPTAIN MIDAS* and *FLIGHT FROM TIME*—all bell ringers. He slipped a bit on *FIRST MAN IN THE MOON*, and has come back with a bang in *WARRIOR MAID OF MARS*. This last is noteworthy for having—to my knowledge, at least—the first “alien” hero to appear on your pages in recent times. Keep an eye on this boy, he’s going places.

Writers like Mullen, McDowell, and (short-stuff) Dee are always acceptable. Margaret St. Clair is good and competent. This is the regular stuff that makes PLANET what it is. These steady ones can compensate for the unevenness of the newer writers. Keep them around.

Suggestion: Get some Azimov, Van Vogt, Shiras and deCamp. It may cost you something, but it will do the circulation worlds of good.

Conclusions: PLANET is a fine space-adventure mag, but it could stand a shade of polish. I don’t mean for it to go long-hair. Just ease off on the garish format and use a little better grade of paper. Go on, what the hell! Charge an extra nickel and give the readers their money’s worth. It will pay off in the long run.

It is too much to hope for that you could go monthly? No? Then what about bi-monthly? Surely bi-monthly. Every sixty days, a PLANET STORIES! That would be something to look forward to, indeed it would. (*Start looking*—Ed.)

Let me end with one last plea. During your stint as editor of PS, do everything you can to take science-fiction out of the area of the juvenile and the comic-book. Buy stories with something like thought in them and present them in an adult way. The fans will thank you for it.

Sincerely,

DOUGLAS CREIGHTON

THIS, ON A BLUE MONDAY!

2962 Santa Ana St.
South Gate, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

Well, as I review PLANET STORIES down at LASFS, I thought I’d drop you a line to tell you

what’s been hapening. To you, Mr. Bixby, the name Sneary may mean nothing... But there was a day when it could strike terror into the hearts of many a Editor and proof-reader. (*Wel, ding our cats and call us Pavlov, we sea what you meen!*—Ed.) And PLANET was the first to use a letter of nine, so I feel a deep fonness for the dear old ragged pages... And so, as more active work in the inner-circle of fandom took the time I use to spend writing you, I was forced to stop. But nothing has kept me from reading dear old P.S., and now, I even subscribe to the thing, to assure my getting my copy ahead of the herd.

The current issue is up to PLANETS usual standard... Nothing as good as THE ROCKETERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS, but good... Bradbury of course rates the best written story... His people always seem to be so alive. Infact you can all most feel sorry for them as he thinks up new ways inwhich to torture and kill them off. There was one slight flaw in this one though... Why didn’t they climb under their life-raft, and escape the rain, or even a metal plate from the wreck? But even this doesn’t detract from it.

Maxwell’s duplication idea ought to get a prise for a fine idea, not developed. I’d of liked to seen more of the mix up of ego’s. It is a perfect set up for situation comedy. You might steal even more from the book *Four Sided Triangle* and call it *The two sided Square*. The duplication of people has been a subject touched on but lightly, and then usually to from some sort of paradox.

I read through the lead novel with the usual feeling of “I’ve been here before.” I guess these Bourroughs type tales are a part of PS we will never loose, no mater what we try... I guess if they don’t get any worse than this time, I’ll keep on enjoying them.

Speeking of enjoyment, we would down right enjoy having you, or any fans out this way, dropping in on the 3rd Annual WESTERCON, which the OUTLANDER SOCIETY is giving in L.A., June 18th, in the Knights of Pythias Hall, (3rd floor) 617 Venice Blvd., Los Angeles, Calif. There is no charge, and things start right at 10 AM. We will have authors, and fans, auctions and speachs on science-fictional subjects. It is a annual all day Fan Conference, were the fans in this part of the State get to gether, and rub elbows and conversation with the pro’s. We had 90 there last year, and as this is the First time the Outlanders have sponcered it, we hope to have twice that this year. All fans are welcome, come early, and stay late... For added information write Freddie Hershey, 6335 King Ave., Bell, Calif. (*Luck, sirs!*—Ed.)

As for letters, (Love’em) First to Silverberg for his views on the Viz... Second to Mrs. Bradley, for her views on TRHSE, in the last issue. (What’s this, both Bradley’s writing a letter. Seems almost unfair, but the Boff Perry wrote two letters one issue, so I guess this is O.K.) Oh, give the Third to Weinstein, for a well written letter, though I’m not inclined to agree with him on all points.

We wish to add, that in our estimation, Rodney Palmer, like another gentelman named Palmer of that city, has, to use a current expession no doubt familiar to both, rocks in his head. I’d like him to just try and prove everyone believes in spirts, life after death, etc.—Ha! You will have a lot harder time proving to me there are such things, than I would proving to you that Rockets are going to lift man off Earth in the next five years. That is, unless you believe in dero’s.

Yours,

RICK SNEARY

FINE, WACKY PS

617 Miner Avenue
Seattle 4, Wn.

DEAR EDITOR:

Welcome to the Chair, and I hope you got all your shots first—BEM-fever serum, controversy vaccine, anti-fanzine booster, etc. A good solid selection, this first issue under the Bixby aegis (you just got that aegis back from the cleaners, didn't you? It's so nice and spotless—just wait, though).

Wasn't Bradbury on the wrong planet this time? Or are we to expect a new series? He and Miss St. Clair are the standouts of Summer '50 (Hey, "Standouts of Summer '50"—a PS title if ever I saw one! Now all I need is a story). The lady does a neat job on—shall we say—well-proven ideas.

Every reader has to tell the Ed how to do his job, but I have only a few minor items. No beefs on the stories, artwork, or untrimmed edges—the mag has survived over ten years as is, so why break up a winning combination? (*Love that man!*—Ed.) But the blurbs—those beautiful, breathless blurbs! What say we try having them written by someone who has read the stories? Might even, if that works, try the same treatment for the titles.

Paley to the contrary, let's *don't* have a "fan corner." There must be others like myself, who wearily trudge through the "fan departments," hopelessly looking for some sign of activity within a reasonable distance. Apparently the necessary combination of talent, spare time, money and equipment hasn't jelled around here. This is strictly a private beef, but seriously, there are enough fanclub-fanzine departments going now to meet the demand, and we need all your inelastic pages for stories. Yes, stories! I may be eccentric, but I buy sfmags for the reading material.

If your volume-and-issue numbering has been consistent, this magazine must have started around the fall of 1939, right? (*The first PS was dated Winter, '39—Ed.*) In that case I guess I've been with you from the start, except for part of the war (glutton for punishment). Keep up the fine wacky standard of PS and the Vizigraph, and the next ten years should be as enjoyable as the last ten.

Yours for more Bradbury and Brackett,
F. M. Busby

R. DEE SIMPLY TRIFFIC!

4 Spring Street,
Lubec, Maine

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

Or can we possibly call you "Bix"? Or "JB"? Anyway, I got the flat package in the mail recently and eagerly opened it. Let me again thank everybody concerned for this original. The plates in PS can't do justice to the originals, can they? Especially if the pics are by Alden McWilliams!

Now to the current issue of PS. Alfred Coppel made a pretty good attempt at the classical PS adventure-epic but despite his entertaining effort, it couldn't match past epics by Fox, McDowell, Fennel and other authors. But it was good though. Hope he tries more like it too. But who was responsible for the mis-title and blurb? Oh, well, ya gotta attract buyers. As long as the story pleases...

St. Clair's FLOWERING EVIL was only mildly interesting, mostly because the idea itself isn't new. But orchids to her for the ending.

Bradbury's DEATH BY RAIN is quite refreshing. Too bad the basic theme of the story is obsolete now. Dust clouds, not rain, is the latest and more likely theory. But nevertheless, I hope RB has a half-dozen more stories in his files that should be completed sooner or later and... I hope... sold.

I see William Oberfeld has sold again. Good. Shows how a fan (or ex-fan) *can* sell if he sticks to it. Too few will stick. The idea was nice. Gim-mick better. Gad, what an ending.

The first-person narrative in COLLISION ORBIT was startlingly new-ish for some reason or other. Probably because I'm more used to finding them in detective novels and mags. Altho I have stopped reading them to any extent, a first-person yarn somehow rings the bell with me, when it is put over well enough. This one almost wasn't. But I am encouraged. How? you ask? Well, somehow, the yarns I write are usually in first-person too. But I'll spare you for a while yet.

Alfred E. Maxwell. Sounds familiar. Whether it really is familiar or not, the story was good. Ran smoother than most of the others this time. Nice idea, that duplication. Like to see more by Maxwell too.

MOON OF TREASON was undoubtedly the best in the issue. I like McDowell's writing. Goes down smoothly (oops, thinking of a drink). He usually has a novel and useful gimmick in his yarns too. This time it's the guy's nictitating lids. (Say "nictitating" five times, fast.) (*So, it's difficult!*—Ed.) Definitely MORE BY McDOWELL!

In Stan Mullen's SUICIDE COMMAND a more or less rare, these days, atmosphere was attained, briefly, when they discovered the hole in the little asteroid and the horror beyond the door. Hints at things utterly, alienly horrible and fantastic were the mainstay of the early interplanetary yarns, many of them anyway, and all too few times these days do we find them. Mullen, however, seems to have a knack for this touch and I find it quite often in his yarns.

Whoever Roger Dee might be, he is a good yarn spinner. This one was especially liked by yours truly. Good basic idea, well handled and triffic ending. Triffic, simply triffic! Wonder who he is...

Now... to YOU, dear Editor. Welcome and all that... and as I once before mentioned, don't go tinkering with your typo. You, as do most PS editors, have a great sense of humor and promise to give any unwary fan-humorist a run for his original, so please stay with us awhile. Also, must be a great change from JUNGLE STORIES to PLANET STORIES! Anyhow, a few hopeful suggestions concerning the art-work. You could drop all the artists except McWilliams and I'd be satisfied. But such an event being unlikely, please do use McWilliams' work more than you did this time. Mayan isn't bad, and neither is Vestal when he has his better moments, which he didn't this time. Who did the pic for Mullen's yarn by the way? (*McLink—Ed.*)

To the Vizigraph we happily praise. Had to giggle at your by-play (or dialogue) in Shirley Henderson's letter. Things like that make incipient humorists jealous! Anyhow, the three: Paul Ganley for No. 1 spot, Robert Silverberg for No. 2 and Shirley Henderson for No. 3. And as for Fredric Filo, well, we have one of these characters every once in a while. Everybody lets their hair down once in a while. Not that I'd say that people writing in to the Vizigraph are doing that, all of the time. But in bull sessions, in parties,

people on a drunk, etc., you'll find a lot more so-called childishness, drivel, etc., than the alleged same in this column. Especially when there is so little of it. Most letters are more or less constructive criticism with the writers dressing it up a bit. Anyone can have fun. Especially when it is not harmful. And if Fredric Filo happens to deign to attend the NORWESCON in Portland, Oregon this September, he can talk it over with people who write these letters. I also happen to plan on attending. He might find that these people who write this "childish... asinine... hogwash" in their spare moments can probably give him quite a lambasting in applied physics, atomic theory, plot-building, etc., any number of things. Even poker. (Yum!—Ed.)

Before I end this unintentionally long letter, let me say I'm glad to know that PLANET STORIES is going to be bi-monthly soon!

Ed Cox

HOUSE DIVIDED

Box 298
Tahoka, Tex.

DEAR ED:

An ancient scribe once put forth the theory that a house divided against itself cannot stand. Hark-en, then, to my tale of woe, and tell me, if I tell me you can, what magic ointment will cement together that which has been so rudely torn apart?

Everything was going oh so smoothly until your recent PLANET hit the stands. It looked interesting. Its titles sounded intriguing. The cover was beautiful. Can you blame me for tossing my last two dimes at the salesgirl and hurrying home with the Martian Warrior-Maid clutched tight to my breast? (Lord, no!—Ed.)

The first wrong note sounded when I found another copy of the same PLANET curled up on the divan with the pride of my house, the joy of my heart, the preparer of my infrequent meals! Having just finished off the WARRIOR-MAID OF MARKS she was centering her attention upon Beck's COLLISION ORBIT. I was, for the time being, an UNWELCOME TENANT.

Advancing the guarded opinion that I considered ALPHA SAY, BETA DO the best story in the mag, my next conscious thought was that SUICIDE COMMAND might have been a more appropriate selection. Never in all my life had I dreamed that a man could exist at such low intellectual levels as I found myself occupying!

I admitted that the plot was older than my grandfather's great grandfather. That the comparative analysis of scientist versus floor-polisher was another oldie. That split personalities was nothing new in this age of psychology and psychiatrists. That men have been falling in love with women, and women with men, since time immemorial. That one of the parties to such love-making has always taken the initiative. That if the man didn't save the woman, the woman must save the man. I tried only to make the very minor point that the story was well-written!

That, I fear, was a major mistake.

I am now thoroughly convinced that my own opinion is of no value even to myself. In fact, I now fully realize it to be a detriment!

And so, from the depths of my despair, I entreat you to save my hurts by publishing only such stories as may safely be called GOOD!

Woefully yours,

ROBERT A. BRADLEY

Buckroe Beach, Va.

TO: EDITOR CHROME BIXBY

DEAR RED:

Have read nothing more than the Visigraph and not even all of that—Don't know when I've enjoyed anything as much as I have your editorial comment. Suggest you keep up the present method of commentary (You know, like this)—It will allow you to make all the acrid, acrimonious, pleasant or just plain funny statements you wish and the brevity will keep you from boring either yourself or us... so far as I am concerned, you could even say a bit more—I enjoy you.

In answer to a question; yes, I would like to know PLP's penname... (I don't know whether he's a lion in literary circles yet or not, but my lousay typing is making him one here.)

Comments on letters:

I don't like people who don't have Intelligence enough to appreciate me and my kind—Tell me Frederic, does Filo stand for... (Whup, whup... veddy witty, Stu, but CENSORED—Ed.)?

Ah yes, Zimmer... So you've never read any science in a science fiction magazine. Well, there was some once. It was entitled "The Frame Concept Theory." It was primarily concerned with the concept and use of macrocosmic and microcosmic mathematical number frames. I read the thing out of curiosity more than anything else, but to my surprise, found immediate use for it in an advanced calculus course...

WHO GOES THERE—originally a story about the first world war, I forget who by—Seems to be a popular title.

As for the stories themselves, rate 'em yourself. You've read 'em. I haven't.

Bye for now—

STUART A. LINE

THE SAGE SPEAKS AGAIN

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

It has indeed been many a weary aeon since I last had a letter in the Vizi. I have been leading a life of Chastity, Celibacy, and Boredom... a barren, sterile, steeless existence. Few and sparse have been the letters I have dashed off to the proz. But now, I can contain myself no longer and must dash a letter off to deah ole PS.

And we have a new editor among our ranks, eh? Welcome, thrice welcome in the Name of Allah! You have a nice uncluttered, unpretentious little mag here, let's hope you do well by it. Could stand some improvement. Frinstance the Vizi-graf. For the last several munts it has been the stomping ground of scientific discussions, racial prejudice, vicious back-biting feuds, and others of their ilk. Gone are the vastly amusing, entertaining letters of yesteryear... gone are the Giffords, the Asimovs, the Lessers, the Shaws, the Olivers, the Kennedys, the Snearys, the yes! the Carters, and in their place: Sigler. Cox. What a depraved set of substitutes! Mr. Bixby, let's make the Vizi as interesting and entertaining as it used to be, back in the days when PLANET had the best dam letter-column in the proz. We can do it, boys!

I neglected to write last issue, but I should have said something about Bradbury's wonderful FOREVER AND THE EARTH, which was the best thing he's done for old Fiction House since the memorable PILLAR OF FIRE. FATE was really superb: an example of the sort of prose Brad is quite capable of writing, but too seldom

does. That yarn was so compelling that I had to go and re-read Wolfe's OF TIME AND THE RIVER, which contains the passage from which Brad got his title. PLANET bumbles along month after month, printing second rate space-opera in the main, but boy! when you do get a good yarn it is really good!

Best story in the Summer issue was possibly the Coppel novel, and probably best only because of its length. I have an idiosyncrasy of preferring long stories to short. 'S'funny. The story was entertaining and had lots of nice wham-socko-boom-er-dead action. Colorful. But it couldn't begin to come up to the Brackett tale. Hint! Not bad, tho, in fact pretty good in its own way.

Ray Bradbury's effort was a distinct let-down after his fine story the ish before. When Brad writes good he writes very good, but when he louses one up it really reeks. DEATH-BY-RAIN, I fear, fell into the latter classification. Stanley Mullen had a fairly intriguing short, and UNWELCOME TENANT had a quite clever idea, albeit one I have seen before, and in PLANET too. Good, tho.

All in all the ish was something below average. With a new editor at the helm, perhaps things will start looking up. I'd like to see some more by Leigh Brackett and Henry Kuttner, of course more Bradbury, and if you could lure Edmond Hamilton into the fold I wouldn't complain. A new cover artist might be a help. Your interior artists are competent, hardly outstanding, but competent. One could dream of Bok, Cartier, Bonestell and Rogers, but leave us not be so unworldly. Such things are impossible.

It might be worth-while to reinstate the P.S. Feature Flash, always one of PLANET's more interesting features. Only this time alternate, a thumbnail sketch of an author, then a fan, then an artist, then author, et cetera. You might lengthen the Editor's squib at the head of the Vizi into a regular honest-to-gosh editor's page, if you like. Then we could hear about stories forecoming and new departments and the like. I think every pro should have something of that sort.

Anyway, welcome Mr. Bixby, and best luck with future issues!

LIN CARTER
"The Sage of St. Pete"

METAPHYSICAL ALLIANCE

501 East Lincoln,
Wellington, Kans.

MY DEAR MR. BIXBY:

I call you Mister Bixby for the sheer originality of it, as you have probably been by this time addressed in every anagrammatic form to which your initials adapt themselves.

The Summer 1950 issue of PLANET stacks up like this. Ray Bradbury, as usual coming thru with one of his seemingly plotless stories, which never the less has a distinctive appeal of its own. MOON OF TREASON, and SUICIDE COMMAND both deserve a word in their favor, though both had loose ends that were not tied into the story thread. UNWELCOME TENANT, Bradbury again?

The rest of the stories were unimpressive, with the exception of FLOWERING EVIL and WARRIOR MAID OF MARS. These two are feeble, and I feel inclined to debate whether either is STF. I might also add that WARRIOR MAID is precisely the type of stuff which will drive fan and fen away from the newsstand in

flocks. (Disagree...PS, almost the last berth of occasional Ye Olde Cliff-hanger Stfe, is doing right well—Ed.)

Enough of the incidentals, now to the most important part of the magazine, VIZIGRAPH.

Best letter, Al Weinstein, laying out Lucifer. Just one comment, Al. Don't you think that "having a God" is simply the process of worshipping some particular quality in oneself?

What happened to the address on Shirley Henderson's letter? (Not enclosed—Ed.) Whatever it was, it caused me to spend hours going thru the Hendersons in the Wichita Phone Directory, bothering Hell out of innocent and completely unsuspecting people. Result? Nil!

Please inform Miss Henderson that if she would like to get in with a group interested in writing STF and modern literature she can contact me at the above address.

Her, Miss Henderson's, definition of STF, has that particular twist to it that could mean she is a girl who is concerned with more than whether her lipstick is on straight.

I agree, STF is a state of mind. But, not the same state of mind in everyone who reads it. It is however, an outgrowth from the desire to be, or the conviction that one is, unique, different. Which is true in the sense of individual difference. But, in the overall aspect, looking at the human race with the eyes of the philosophers—"the officer's lady, and Rosy O'Grady, are sisters under the skin."

In other words, you and I differ in the respect that we do not have the same experiences, or the same (consequent) desires, per se. Nor do you and I have the same amount of energy to expend toward the attainment of those desires.

We are similar in that we must eat, and sleep, work and play, love and be loved; in the fact that we fear what we do not understand, logicize and justify our actions to ourselves. And, if we are mature, we attempt by realizing and comparing these similarities in each other to understand a little more of the people about us.

So we see that the STF fan is actually reaching, thusly into himself, forming a metaphysical alliance with the world. He is attempting, not to operate thru similarity to others, but thru his own individual difference.

Perhaps STF is somewhat of a bible to the Fan. He could do worse. But, nevertheless I maintain, that any literary form, STF included, must be analyzed thru its readers and writers, and what particular fulfillment they find within it.

E. A. MCKINLEY

WANTED: A SUITABLE ANSWER

107 Hayes Street
Seattle 9, Washington

DEAR JEROME:

I have enjoyed the Vizigraph of late with the discussions of this and that and especially the creation of the universe. I thought I would write and put in my thoughts on the subject. A subject like that can be argued for years without getting anywhere. You just keep going in circles and never find a suitable answer.

How old is the Earth? How old is the sun? The galaxy? The Universe? Nobody knows. The age of the Earth is estimated at so many million years by eminent scientists who base their estimates upon the disintegration of uranium. Uranium has a half life of 4.6 billion years, or a whole life of 9.2 billion years. (Mephitic physics, Buryl

—Ed.) Since there is still uranium present on the Earth and in the sun and in other suns, they can't have existed for more than 9.2 billion years! Yet everyone agrees that the Universe has lasted for billions of years. How come there's uranium left? Has the Universe been in existence for less than 9.2 billion years? What was before that time? Was that a time? (*Boy, WAS it!*—Ed.) Etc.

I'm an agnostic. Perhaps some of your readers can tell me.

The best story in the mag was DEATH-BY-RAIN. The rest were good, but I liked that the best. Let's have more Brackett, Bradbury, and artists that read the stories before drawing illos of them.

Sincerely,

BURYL PAYNE

OL' DUSTY ATOMIC BOMB

546 Ellis
Wichita 9, Kansas

DEAR EDITOR:

I am glad to see that PLANET has acquired a new editor. It may be that the magazine will improve in quality now, as for a long time it's been the same old tripe.

I thought that the cover novel in the present issue was excellent for it dealt with a problem as old as humanity itself. That is, when an old and decaying culture meets up with a newer and more progressive culture, what should they do about it? Shall they act like little children and die rather than accept the newer concepts or shall they act like men and begin to build anew upon what the newer culture has to offer. The hero was torn between these two extremes. He realized that his world was dying because of its inability to meet its problems yet he was afraid to accept that which was better. The conflict he faced before he could reconcile the two made a good story.

The cover illustration was better than most of them have been but whoever did the interior picture should have read the story first. It seems as if he just can't leave any duds on his dimes.

I just couldn't get interested in Bradbury's short story. He may be able to write but it seems that all his stories blithely ignore some matter that no intelligent author should overlook. According to Bradbury it never quit raining on the planet, Venus, which would be a violation of natural law as anybody should know. Rain can only fall when sufficient water has evaporated to saturate the air. If it were always raining there could be no evaporation and hence no rain. How silly can some authors get?

The story, THE ENORMOUS WORD, was rather interesting but why do they always have to do everything the hard way? They had to labor like the dickens to make an atomic bomb to blast the invaders when old man TNT could have done the job in a fraction of the time. It would be perfectly easy to use aircraft with steam or Diesel power and mechanical controls or even some form of jet or rocket in which the ignition was accomplished by an ordinary flame to drop heavy bombs on the base or even to fire light cannon at the ships.

If it were desirable to use some other method it would be possible to use long range bombardment with heavy guns placed under cover of darkness or even do it with such weapons as the 105 m.m. howitzers drawn by steam or Diesel engines. As a last resort a raid by a few regiments of troops armed with automatic rifles, demolition

grenades, bazookas, and a few fifty calibre machine guns firing armor piercing shells could do a pretty good job. After all, it has been done before. But that wouldn't sound as good so the atomic bomb has to be hauled out and dusted off.

The other stories were just so-so. How about some more interesting letters in the Visigraph and I don't mean the, 'Heh, heh, ain't I the dope?' type, either.

Respectfully,

EDWIN SIGLER

1) *Oberfeld's alien ships were "able to detect the slightest unauthorized action on the ground below"—which kills your bombardment/armed-raid theory—*and 2) *the aliens could by pressing a button in their Sahara stronghold "bring quick death to every single Earthman"—thus the necessity for a weapon swift and deadly (and unobtrusively made ready) as the A-bomb.*

Tsk.

ROMULUS, THE BLUE BEM

1455 Townsend Ave.
New York 52, N. Y.

DEAR BIX:

I've been walking around in sort of a stupor (as usual), thinking about what to write in this Vizi-letter. I could tell you about Romulus, the Blue BEM who dictates my letters and eats hot iron pyrites, but Rommy is a sensitive soul and doesn't like publicity. Then again I might comment on how corny are the efforts of various Vizifans to convince us of their erudition, but I guess there would be a scarcity of orig votes 'round my way for a while. Of course, there's the old standby of writing a story, let us say, about the Ghu-Slobberers in the Venusian slime marshes, but maybe I can sell that idea to MESSY HORROR or something. Therefore, I have but one recourse left. I must comment on the latest issue of PS!

I realize this will come as a shock. After wading through masses of missives, you have come to one which talks not about Brackett, not about Null-A, not even about religion, but about PLANET STORIES!

But before I go further, let me offer my condolences to the vacant space that was Paul Payne. And, in case you should feel your dimensional hold slipping, kindly inform Malcolm Reiss that I AM AVAILABLE.

Coppel's WARRIOR-MAID OF MARS was pretty good, but what, pray tell, is a "barbarian worlds novel"?

DEATH-BY-RAIN was fine. Not in the class of FOREVER AND THE EARTH, but fine, still.

The rest of the issue, save for the swell St. Clair story, was about average. I thought the cover was pretty miserable. Anderson has nerve, at least. He signed it this time! This cover bore quite a resemblance to some forty-odd other PS covers, though.

This science-vs.-religion feud has gone far enough. What's it doing in La Vizi, anyhow? And what has become of the famed two-page rule? Both Ganley and Weinstein transgressed this ish. Give Ganley a pic, anyway, for a good letter. Also Bob Silverberg. Give Weinstein a kick in the astral body (or as some no doubt witty stfauthor recently stated in a fanmag ((only Fiction House puts out promags)), the asteroid) (*Yuk—Ed.*) for filling La Vizi with drivel. Can't think of anyone 'cept me to vote the third pic to, so won't vote further.

Roger Dee is a house pseudonym! Roger Dee is a house pseudonym! Roger Dee is a house pseudonym! (*Get lost... it's -----'s private and personal non-de-plume, not a house name. Intriguing, what?—Ed.*)

Having made sure you won't print my letter, I continue—

How's about wringing another story out of Charles Harness? If I have to wait much longer, I may decide to become a poor man's Van Vogt, myself. I've given you fair warning. (*Noted—Ed.*)

Why doesn't PS run more by the big name authors. Following is a list of my favorites, who I'd like to see in PLANET. I've scrambled the names a bit so that the big shots at Fiction House, who think JUNGLE STORIES is the only other mag running fantasy, won't be disillusioned. Anyway, they are: A. Hubbard Van Sturgeon, Theodore DeMacdonald, Murray Vogtinov, Damon Blish, Lester Del Brown, and, Henry Moore Hampadokent Hastgarth.

Yours 'til PS runs parapsychological articles,

MORTON D. PALEY

PROF IS A FAN

2711 La Salle Street
Racine, Wisconsin

DEAR JELLY BEAN:

I really should be writing a theme for English Comp instead of hacking out this article (see what I go through for dear old PS), but since my prof is also a sfian (wonder of wonders) if he sees this in the next issue of PLANET he might be inclined to forgive the lateness of my theme—I hope!

Oh, Al Weinstein, tch, tch, tch. Before you accuse anyone of being a fanatic always check to see that you aren't going off the far end yourself. I won't say much about Al's letter except to reply that in certain places he appears to get as fanatical at one extreme as he accuses "Sathanas" of getting at the other. What Al apparently doesn't realize is that there is a cold, scientific, logical explanation of God which does reconcile science and religion. I don't want to go into that explanation here for fear of bringing down the wrath of various assorted bishops, Popes, ministers and other members of religious groups, but if Al or anyone else is interested my address is sitting at the top of this letter.

But enough of the profound, leave us turn to the trivial.

OH-HO! We're getting MODEST are we. The usually valiantly-battling (always valiantly-battling) femme on the cover now has a filmy negligee to hide her near-nudeness—pretty soon you'll have her decked out in monk's cloth (perish the thought). (*And bury it deep—Ed.*) On the other hand, Anderson's BEM seems to be approaching the opposite extreme: if he doesn't leggo the aforementioned modestly-attired lady's shield and grab his sagging britches, said britches will soon be hugging said BEM's ankles, which, I should think, would greatly hinder the poor little BEM.

McDowell, as usual, came through with the thud-and-blunder in the best of tradition; his MOON OF TREASON was the best story in the issue. For my money McDowell is one of the best writers you have: what plots, what action... what women!!! (Why don't you write a book, Emmett; everyone else seems to be doing it.) For some reason Bradbury didn't click this issue—perhaps because his last story was so outstand-

FOR MEN ONLY?
THE GIRLS LOVE IT TOO!! ★



**GALS
GAGS
PHOTOS
CARTOONS**

4 BOOKS
EACH DIFFERENT!!

MORE THAN **500** PAGES

only 1 BUCK!

LARCH BOOK CO.
118 East 28 St., New York 16, Dept. 158-A

WORK SHIRTS

Embroidered
NAME FREE

69¢ YOUR NAME

With Each
Order
Over \$1.00 **3 for 1.79**

AMAZING VALUES!

SAVE money! These are surplus stock from a big supply firm. Sturdy, serviceable work shirts, though used, have been washed, sterilized and reconditioned. Every shirt of long-wearing wash materials. Blue or tan. Strongly sewn; reinforced stitching at points of strain. Money back guarantee!

WORK PANTS TO MATCH.....99¢
Blue or Tan. Hand waist measure and leg length.

SHIRT & PANTS TOGETHER.....\$1.68
Blue or Tan. Send shirt neck size, waist and leg length.

COVERALLS.....\$1.49
Blue or Tan. Send chest measurement.

Send No Money!
Give name, address, city or town, size and color choice (also state 2nd color choice). Pay postman plus postage. Or send cash and we ship prepaid. Keep 10 days. If not satisfied, return for refund!

Mail Your Order Today!
YOUNG DISTRIBUTING CO.
Dept. R-A 2605 Elmhurst Detroit 6, Mich.

ing—so he hits a high third, with Margaret St. Clair's FLOWERING EVIL a lagging second. That ending of hers got me, I almost choked. (Don't say it!) Why doesn't someone take away Roger Dee's typewriter ribbon? His style isn't bad but his plots are lousy. I guessed the whole story before I was past the first page. Now, I have written an excellent story that I'm sure you'd . . . (Yeah . . . and fast!—Ed.)

Oh well, On to La Vizi! My dear Larry Rothstein, you just don't understand. PLANET's covers aren't supposed to illustrate a story. PLANET's covers are *symbolic*! The hero is gritting his teeth because he is afraid his false choppers will fall out, and that stuff on his playsuit isn't salad at all, it's the remains of a green Martian turkey that the hero ate raw in a sancrosant ceremony the night before. The pigsticker in his belt wasn't very sharp and the turkey splattered. Now the girl holding the glowing sphere stands for . . . um . . . er . . . why don't you ask Salvador Dali what she stands for? (There's an idea, Ed; get Dali to paint your covers. Then you'd have an excuse.)

If Morton Paley thinks PLANET's shorts are wonderful he ought to see MY shorts—they're green with purple flowers and little yellow butterflies. What's this? Do I see a hint of PLANET becoming bi-monthly? Oh rapture! Oh joy! (Oh yoo hoo, you with the shorts!—Ed.) Switch on the overdrive men, PLANET rides again!

And now at the risk of being prosecuted for plagiarism, I shall dedicate the following poem to PLANET's budding poet-laurier, Wilkie Conner (who I see voted for me—thanks, Wilk):

He's a poet,
And doesn't know it,
But his feet show it—
—They're Longfellow's! . . . Kyuck, kyuck,
kyuck.

(He got 'em wet,
They'd be wet yet,
But John he met—
—John Dryden! . . . yerp, yerp, yerp.—Ed.)

Originals to Ganley, Miss Shirley Henderson (Miss? Did she say Miss? . . . Well, well, well!), and Mad Marion.

BRUCE HAPKE

P.S. You did a swell job on your first issue. Keep the old interPLANETary tradition roaring.

Seriously, Bruce—and Paley, too—we're always looking for new writers. So try. If they're good stories, we'll buy 'em, if they're good stories.

WE STILL LOVE OUR COVERS!

308 W. Clinton St.
Elmira, N. Y.

DEAR JERRY:

Congratulations on your new seat of thorns, brickbats and flowers. May you have a long reign and a profitable one for PS, including a bi-monthly issuance. Incidentally, please bear with my handwriting. I know it's pretty bad, but typewriters are out of range at present.

Having seen, rather unexpectedly, the very welcome sight of my letter in Viz, I must take pen in hand and cry "battle." Despite your love of your covers, couldn't you do something to force your artists into reading the stories they are trying to illustrate? Even the blurb for the story was wrong! I like PS, otherwise I wouldn't be a sub-

scriber, but gibberish, either verbal or pictorial, nauseates me. Where, oh where in the magazine does a woman wield a sword? Where, oh where does a fight show up containing a woman and a man defending themselves against savages armed with guns and Death's Head guardsmen using swords? In comparison, the cover with which I took exception in my last letter was a veritable hunk of truth. By all means let us be artistic, but, at the same time, let us show some consideration for logic.

Which last leads me to a letter written by one Rodney Palmer, who has all his wires short-circuited almost beyond repair. Where did he ever dream up the idea that fantasy is possible and science-fiction impossible? His definition or explanation of why stf is impossible is as fantastic as some of Lovecraft's wildest flights of fancy. I can only conceive that this fan is of very recent vintage, that he has never heard of Robert Heinlein, Anson McDonald (*Latter's the former—Ed.*), Don A. Stuart, Hugo Gernsback, Isaac Asimov, and dozens more who have been writing S-F in the past two decades that I have been a fan. Is it necessary to write a story of the future and include space-travel? Let him read FINAL BLACKOUT and SIXTH COLUMN for answer. Is it necessary to deal entirely with he-men adventurers roaming the universe? Let him read BEYOND THIS HORIZON and THE HUMANOIDS for answer. (*Ironsmith was plenty he-man . . . with brains, of course—Ed.*) Anyone who claims that *everyone* believes in spirits and life after death is contradicting a long history of atheism and agnosticism. In conclusion, order this man one large raspberry in spades!

On to the attack! Mr. Ramsay is also, or should I say must be also, one of these Johnny-come-lately's to S-F. Just one author has refuted his entire presentation on how future civilizations are portrayed. Maybe he never heard of Robert Heinlein and his history of the future and the stories which evolved from that history. SIXTH COLUMN was sociology, through religion, in action. BEYOND THIS HORIZON was genetics completely. If these readers would only do a little back-tracking on what has been published they wouldn't stick their necks out so far all the time. His plaint about musicology is valid, I think, except for one story which contained a figment of it in passing. It appeared in one of the competition and has since been included in an anthology.

Have been brought up short at this point by realizing that I'm writing a book. However, gotta write more yet, just have to!

The stories this issue were not easy to grade. Being the addict that I am, I can never really tell how I want to grade a story because I usually enjoy them all very much. These wonderful fans who can sit down and separate the worth of one story from that of another incite huge gales of envy in me. It could be that I have read too many of them too fast to be able to pin one down and say I liked it just a little better than the rest. However, I can say that MOON OF TREASON was a little different from most mutant stories and I would like to see sequels to it. Ray Bradbury can, when he wants to, write stories with atmosphere like no one in S-F today. This little short was good.

I think I have wearied you by now so I will shut this ink fountain off by saying,

Best of luck,

LARRY ROTHSTEIN

ANOTHER ONE?

320 Stenzel Street
N. Tonawanda, N. Y.

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

I write a letter to Payne L. Paul one day long ago, and he didn't print it. Was I disappointed? No! I've always been this color. Now I see the aforementioned editor has faded into nothingness and one Jerome Bisquit has taken over post. (*We rose to the occasion—Ed.*) "This is good!" I spoke to myself, "I will write this fellow letter." I have now done so.

Cover was most pretty on current issue. Four characters compose the frightening scene. (1) Chinese girlie with gauzy chain-mail. Blue belt pretty too! (2) villain in foreground with red torso and orange legs. His hat is a Daniel Boone original, no doubt. (3) villain in background. This is the most modest fellow of the group, also, he must use ox-blood complexion plan. (4) hero. Cheater! He uses two swords. He is lost my vote.

I readed the Vizigraph also, but I couldn't get the plot. In any case, the Buck Rogers illo went with the story. There were also some other stories in the mag the last time I cast fevered eyes upon it, but I will not mention them, with the exception of DEMISE BY PRECIPITATION by a certain Brad Raybury. This is poor for Mr. Raybury. If he continues to write like that, he'll probably be voted into the editor's chair, and then you, Mr. Jerome, will be the one who is out in the rain. Also, you is traitor to PLANET STORIES. I have seen certain story, by name AND ALL FOR ONE, which is saying under it, where is usually put name of author, Jerome Bixby. Donnerwetter! (This is foreign word which means "What is Bixby doing here?")

I am seen you send pics to best letters in issue. I hereby make vote. Send all three to girl who has written letter on back cover which speaks "I went from size 16 dress to a size 12." That is the sort of thing it is making me a great happiness to hear.

Goodbye to you now, Mr. Bisquit. Don't make P.S. a bi-monthly, whatever you do. Once every three months is enough. I can always go back to Shaver, you know. Hee hee hehehehe.

Love and kisses,

AL LEVERENTZ

Oh, well... there's one in every deck. Say, Al, was your mother ever frightened by a Sneyr?

FOR SHAME!

418 High Street
Closter, N. J.

DEAR JET BOMB:

I don't know why you fellows persist in putting out the Summer issues of PLANET STORIES just as the last snows are melting off the ground, but again said magazine arrived on time, dated three months in the future. It's very perplexing.

Very.

So was this month's cover. The heroine's negligence or whatever it is she's wearing, looks as though it hasn't been washed in years. Why... Why you can hardly see through it! For Shame!

P.S. is slipping. This issue you printed three readable stories, two of which said nothing and not very well. McDowell always writes a good adventure yarn, but what has happened to those wonderful novels he used to write with the titles with colors in them? MOON OF TREASON was average. Just.



NEW! COMIC Booklets
A fresh, new line of comic booklets for adults. Rich in lusty humor, with good, clear illustrations. 12 of these little booklets, all different, sent to you prepaid for \$1. No COD please.
NOVEL ARTS,
P.O. BOX 410, DANVILLE, ILL.

WANT TO BE A MERCHANT SEAMAN?
\$195 APPROX. MONTHLY OR MORE **STARTING PAY**
PLUS FOOD LODGING **TRAVEL-ADVENTURE CAREER AT SEA ON AMERICAN SHIPS**

NO EXPERIENCE REQUIRED TO START
EX-SERVICEMEN WITH SUFFICIENT SERVICE
MAY QUALIFY FOR SHIP'S OFFICERS
for further information WRITE today to:
MERCANTILE INFORMATION BUREAU OF GALVESTON
Box 6954-D, Walbrook Station Baltimore 16, Md.



SPEEDY STITCHER
Sews Lock-Stitch Like a Machine
Save time and money in repairing shoes, boots, leather jackets, gloves, auto tops, saddles and many other things. Speedily sews grain, bag, burial, canvas, leather and heavy textiles and wire cuts on live-stock. Ready to use the minute you need it. Comes with reel of waxed thread and 3 needles in different sizes. Spare needles are carried in handle. Get this handy tool now so that you'll have it when you need it, at home, on hunting, fishing or camping trips. Priced when you need it, but costs only \$1.50 postpaid if you send cash, check or money order. O.O.D. \$1.50 plus fee and postage.
SPORTSMEN'S POST
ONLY **\$1.50** POSTPAID
Dept. FHA
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N. Y.

Do YOU want MONEY, LOVE, and POWER?



Do you feel that opportunity is passing you by? That if someone showed you HOW, you could earn big money, be popular and make people admire you? Wouldn't you like to win in whatever you do? Boss those who now boss you? Deane Hammond, a college trained New York Public Relations Executive has compiled a FORMULA FOR SUCCESS that helped him to open wide the door to SUCCESS, LOVE and HAPPINESS. Don't sit on the sidelines while others obtain life's greatest pleasures. Just send me your name and address for a 10 DAY TRIAL. When the postman delivers the booklet FORMULA FOR SUCCESS with instructions, pay only \$2 plus postage. Follow his directions carefully and I PERSONALLY GUARANTEE that if you are not COMPLETELY SATISFIED within 10 days, I'll send you \$2 right back. You are entitled to try to gain for yourself the HEALTH, WEALTH and HAPPINESS you have always wanted. Write NOW to

TRULOVE
58 WALKER STREET
Dept. 145-AH, New York 13



Photo Schoenfeld

From Three Lions

SUBMARINE WARFARE, as foreseen in 1883 by an again-unknown artist. This sketch predates by five years the launching of the first naval submarine, which, to our way of thinking, makes it valid enough scientfictioniana. Note the frogmen on bitty saddle-subs, more of an innovation. Our favorite is the stiff-backed Don Quixoteish character in lower left . . . one feels somehow that he should be tilting with a water-wheel. Incidentally, all credit for procuring these pics belongs to Planet's Leptor-rhinian Pipistrelle.

Margaret St. Clair got by using a plot that has been an old faithful for years and years. Usually the plant gets to eat the human though. Something like that should happen to Miss St. Clair.

Raying about Ray Bradbury's story would be a useless procedure. Every one else will probably go into raptures over it, but I shall control myself and merely say it was great, wonderful, super, excellent, unforgettable, slobber, terrific!!!

Why does that wonderful man always write

such good stories for you good folks. Either Ray writes a classic (hate that word), or a near-classic, or else he writes a dud. In the past year he's been writing quite a few duds, but has never palmed one off on you. I guess you're not one of those editors, who, enchanted by The Master's name, buy everything submitted without even reading the darn things. Anyway, **DEATH-BY-RAIN** was excellent.

It was kinda cute to read, right after Ray's ex-

cellent short, such a poor imitation of his writing. THE ENORMOUS WORD deserves a large belch, such as the one in the story.

La Vizi was pretty good this month, but the subject of debate is pretty much out of place. I'm sorry I had a hand in it. No letter section should be devoted to the tearing down of another's religious beliefs. It is not healthy for either side. I am an agnostic, but I see no point in trying to shatter the spiritual foundations of a person who has found his or her answer. If they want to worship God, Science, Nothing, or themselves, let them be. They are hurting no one. But by constant criticism we are hurting each other and ourselves. Let's all try to define Science-fiction or something. (No, no... let's drop that TOO!—Ed.)

Somebody wanted to know what progress is, I think they were asking me. I think progress, in the case of a civilization, is beneficial change. If you don't agree with my contention that religion—in the past, mind you—has hindered progress, write me. The Vizigraph is not the place.

Whatever happened to Gardner F. Fox and his super-human heroes. Hmm? When do we get some more of Brackett? (*January ish*—Ed.) Howabout a novel by E. Hamilton?

Useless questions!!

Well, anyway,

I remain very truly mine,

DAVID M. CAMPBELL

PRYOR ASKS FOR IT...

363½ Amar Street
San Pedro, Calif.

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

Nobody got it, huh? I'm referring to the title THE ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS. There were numerous mentions of it, derogatory and otherwise, but nobody made the obvious connection.

Have none of your erudite readers branched out far enough to read the hilarious works of Robert J. Casey? One of his books was titled "The Cannoners Have Hairy Ears." Has a familiar ring, doesn't it?

According to Casey, he picked the phrase for its euphony. Maybe Bennett thought it would be an equally good title, slightly paraphrased, for a space opera—and it wasn't bad.

As long as I'm using your time, how about a timid query which will probably bring down the wrath of fandom on my hapless head. What's so good about this Ray Bradbury? (*CRASH!*—Ed.)

I've patiently perused his stuff, yawned at the ending, and gone on with the magazine for years now. Yet, each following issue brings slandering screeches for more from the alleged readers. Why?

He takes a tired old earth-bound plot, juices it up with lots of dialogue and word-pictures (a la the 1920 Hemingway school "the rain spattered on the sidewalk like machine gun bullets"), then transplants it to Mars or Venus and it's "WONDERFUL." Why?

It may be sacrilege to suggest it, but if the Bradbury lovers would look over some of the expatriate writers' work of the '20s they could find reams of the stuff that Bradbury is peddling—but earthbound. Maybe it's better on Venus where the rain cuts and hacks.

My three cents worth,

WAYNE PRYOR

GET RID of your Callouses CORN GO QUICK-EASY SURE-SAFE

END-O-CORN removes the most stubborn, painful old corns and callouses every time. No pain, no fuss. You'll say it's worth \$50 but we will rush a jar to you prepaid and insured for only one dollar. Just address:

END-O-CORN Rutland 19, Vermont



DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. While for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men.

In Business Since 1909
300,000 Satisfied Customers
THE NEWELL COMPANY
293 Clayton St., St. Louis 5, Mo.

FREE BOOK



YOUR OWN BUSINESS FOR \$50.00 !!

Be your own boss—make steady profits in the vending machine business. No experience necessary—work full or part time. Send for free catalog explaining how to carry on this money-making business with nut, candy or gum vending machines.

PIONEER VENDING SERVICE
ADDRESS ALL MAIL TO DEPT. F-C
461 SACKMAN ST. • BROOKLYN 12, N. Y.

BLUSHFUL! DARING!

Famous Dwight Fiske and Nan Blackstone Party Records

Now available by Prepaid, Insured Mail

RECORD SERVICE
FHI, W.O.W. Bldg., Omaha 2, Nebr.

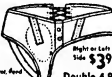
WRITE FOR FREE CATALOG

RUPTURE-EASER

FOR MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN

A strong, form fitting, washable support. Back lacing adjustable. Snaps up in front. Adjustable leg strap. Soft, flat groin pad. No steel or leather bands. Unexcelled for comfort. Also used as after-operation support. Give measure around the lowest part of the abdomen. Perfectly right, side or double. We pay postage except on COI'S PAPER BRACE CO.

308 East 12th Dept. FHG Kansas City 6, Mo.



Right or Left Side **\$3.95**
Double **4.95**

DRUNK?

DOCTOR'S MARVELOUS NEW DISCOVERY RELIEVES DRUNKENNESS IN 5 DAYS

Does Drunkenness Threaten Your Happiness or Your Loved Ones? Our Remarkable New Discovery Quickly and Easily Helps Bring Relief From All Desires For Liquor With This Craving For Liquor Gone, No Will Power is Necessary To Stop Drinking! This is Strictly A Home Method! Easy To Take! Working Like It Before! You Can Go To Business And Carry On Your Social Life As Usual. While Using Our Method May be used secretly for whiskey, wine or beer! Improvement is Noticed In A Remarkably Short Time! The Price is Amazingly Low! Only \$10.00 For The Entire Method, Formula and Instructions! This is The Only Method That Guarantees Satisfaction or Your Money Refunded! You Will Bless The Day You Saw This As Thousands Have Already Done!

Pay Postman On Delivery! Mail Us Your Name and Address Only!

SCIENTIFIC AIDS CO., INC. Dept. 15B Box 118, Jersey City 3, N.J.



SEND NO MONEY



FOOTBALL ACTION

ALL-AMERICAN FOOTBALL MAGAZINE

FOOTBALL STORIES

***A trio of Hard-Hitting
Sports Magazines...***

that offer a gridiron-full of fast-moving, power-laden football novels and short stories plus a brace of pigskin fact articles and special features.

You can get these touchdown bargains at your favorite news stand...

**On Sale
Now**

WE HAVE A LITTLE DESK!

P.O. Box 877,
Grand Central Station,
New York 17, N. Y.

DEAR JERRY:

You too should be awarded a pic... the one on the bottom of page 95 of the Summer PLANET, that's the one I mean; and you can have half of it after I've used the other half for stuffing the crack in my window-payne, (Gad! that name again?) which suffered dire affects due to my tossing the Summer P.S. at same as the after-maths of an uncontrollable rage which seized this erudite person when he noted that his fine, long and edifying epistle was lacking in fandumb's hack corner, La Phizzi.

But to business, and don't ask me what type of, or I might give it to you after what you did or didn't do to my litter. But hearken! Why should I complain? Though my epistle was not there, ample revenge was taken upon your pointed pate with the appearance of the very outstanding story, COLLISION ORBIT, written by CLYDE BECK, one of my many foremost and intelligent relatives... and all Becks *are* intelligent for that matter. And though I may seem rather biased, the above really was the best story in the issue.

But in order of merit, the other tales fell in the following category:

WARRIOR MAID OF MARS, by Coppel, falls in second place as being a fine but very stereotyped composition of a very old theme; could've been hackier though if not for the crafty pen of author Coppel, who seems the sort of author who can make the worst tale appear as one of the best.

FLOWERING EVIL—a typical Maggie St. Clair yarn, written in the spirit of her "Oona & Jick" tales of yore... and I've often wondered why all her stories, although well written, keep on having the similar style as her past ones do!! Third Place for this 'un.

DEATH-BY-RAIN, was a fine Bradbury yarn, and though not his best, was good readin' stuff; but how's about having our fair-haired boy of the pulps do a lead novel for a change! That'd be a welcome treat. 4th for this one. And for the sake of conserving space, the others go like this:

MOON OF TREASON, by McDowell, 5th.

UNWELCOME TENANT, by Dee, 6th.

THE ENORMOUS WORD, by Oberfield, 7th.

ALPHA SAY, BETA DO, by Maxwell, 8th.

SUICIDE COMMAND, by Stan Mullen, 9th.

And as we come to the letter section of the latest P.S., I cannot help but note the prattlings of Fred Filo, who feels that all such letter writers as we could never contribute to the enlightenment of the world's masses, or so I gather from his baleful demeanor. On some points of his dissertation though, I can't help but fully agree with him, since, if it were not for the fear that one's letter wouldn't get printed if one did not conform to certain standards of idiocy or form in lauding the contents of each issue properly, all letters would, in general, have more of an air of authenticity and interest in their format; but there seems to exist the stigma of doubt in all of our minds when e'er anyone of us takes pen in hand and attempts to be original and speak straight from the shoulder, since, "We gotta sound pleasant when writin' letters to the little man behind the big desk." Suh! I'll have you-all know that all this has the earmarks of a subversive form of dictatorship about it... the policy I mean. (*Policy, hell! We've never called for goo, and never intend to!—Ed.*) But I'll disagree with Filo that

La Vizi's epistles are "stupid trash," since it is quite evident that he hasn't taken a gander at some of the other alleged litter-columns of other zines, else he'd know that one doesn't have to praise "all of the stories of P.S. all of the time" in order to have a letter printed, though I could be wrong on that point, and I'm NOT referring to the one atop your head either. (O-o-o, you made a funny!—Ed.) One thing I'd welcome, and probably would be most relieved over, and that would be in having confidence that if a letter HAS something to say, and would be considered of general interest to others, why not print 'em instead of scrapping 'em? And what of it if there is a cuss word or more included! You could always delete it or substitute it one way or the other... I think it would be one of the most welcome changes ever to be made in any STF publication if we can show the other mags that there DOES exist an unbiased and warm fan-letter-column wherein you *DON'T* necessarily have to praise the stories, rave about the artists and shout about how-wonderful-the-editor-is-looking.

Before we leave the cold shores of Manhattan, let us cast a few fond votes on M. Zimmer Bradley, Conrad Johnson and Rodney Palmer... and many thanks for remembering me, Rod!

And with the strumming of our ukeleles, we bid adieu until we sail back again next Spring to buy the Fall P.S.—Egad! Wot a seasonal time warp!!

CALVIN THOS, BECK
Pres. of the American
Science-Fantasy Society

To repeat, there's no "letter policy" here at P.S. Any interesting, well-written letter has an odds-on chance of hitting print, whether it raves or rants. Only requirements are: double-space it on one side of the sheet, and keep it down to two pages or thereabouts... which, chum, is how come we chopped two pages out of your present opus.

WEAKEST LINK

201 Veterans Village
Canton, New York

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

Welcome to the Siege Perilous for the little time that will be allotted to you before your decooconing into an author or something.

The summer issue of PLANET is a great pleasure—every story is worth far more than the two and a half cents it cost me—in fact there are bits in each worth dollars. Margaret St. Clair's FLOWERING EVIL is her usual gem of resourcefulness in humans in the future, and Bradbury's DEATH-BY-RAIN is the most immediate transference of sensation that I can remember. Roger Dee's UNWELCOME TENANT is an effective variation on the possession theme, most convincing; and Oberfield's ENORMOUS WORD is notable for the language of the aliens. McDowell's MOON OF TREASON, with its well-motivated fast-moving action contains a bit of description in its fifth paragraph (the warming of the space ship) which keeps a story real. Editors may come and go, but PLANET certainly keeps spinning beautifully.

I must get in my pennyworth on the 'what is science-fiction' question. I can't see how you can define a type of fiction by its effects and functions. Science-fiction is certainly set apart from other fiction only by its content, which seems to be the doings of individuals as they are affected by scientific discoveries and the scientific method. This



TOOTHACHE?

Quick relief with Dent's. Use Dent's Tooth Gum or Dent's Tooth Drops for cavity toothaches. Use Dent's Dental Polulice for pain or soreness in gums or teeth. At all drug stores.

"Since 1888"

DENT'S

TOOTH GUM
TOOTH DROPS
DENTAL POLULICE

Do You Want to Make Men OBEY YOU?



Do you want to make him love you wildly, fiercely? Do you want to make him say, "Darling, I adore you. I worship you. I'll do ANYTHING for YOU!" Do you want to make him OBEY your every command? Then use CHEZ-ELLE (What a Perfume) to help you CONTROL Men. One woman told me that CHEZ-ELLE is the STRONGEST perfume she ever used. Another woman told us that she blessed the day she first used CHEZ-ELLE, because now her husband

comes home at night to help her.

Just send me your name and address and I will rush a Trial Bottle of CHEZ-ELLE (What a Perfume) to you. When the postman delivers CHEZ-ELLE in a plain package, deposit only \$2 plus postage (3 for \$5) with him on this GUARANTEE. Use CHEZ-ELLE for 10 days. If you don't agree that CHEZ-ELLE is the most POWERFUL perfume you ever used, return it and I'll send you \$2 right back. Write NOW to

TRULOVE, 58 Walker Street, Dept. 145-AC, New York 13

Illustrated Comic Booklets

Sell our ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS and other NOVELTIES. Each booklet size 4 1/2 x 2 3/4. We will send 25 assorted booklets prepaid upon receipt of \$1.00 or 75 assorted booklets sent prepaid upon receipt of \$2.00. Wholesale novelty price list sent with order only. No orders sent C. O. D. Send Cash or Money-order.

REPSAC SALES CO.

65 Fifth Avenue Dept. K-73 New York 3, N. Y.

BOOKLETS

The kind grown ups like. Each one of these booklets is POKET SIZE, also contains 12 of these joke booklets, ALL DIFFERENT, shipped prepaid upon receipt of \$1.00, or 24 BOOKLETS ALL DIFFERENT shipped prepaid for \$2, cash or money order. No orders sent C. O. D. Print name and address and mail to:

TREASURE NOVELTY CO., Dept. 72 K
28 Cooper Station, New York 3, N. Y.



ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS

THE KIND MEN LIKE!
(VEST POKET SIZE)

They are loaded with rare cartoons. Full of Fun and Humor. 20 DIFFERENT booklets sent prepaid for \$1 in plain sealed wrapper. No C. O. D.'s.

GRAYKO, Dept. 1889 Box 520, G.P.O., N.Y.C. 1

makes any happenings in the future admissible as the proper content of science-fiction, as we seem certain that the future will be at least partly determined by scientific discoveries, but it would also allow the writing of DeKruif (if it had plot and more direct characterization) in such works as *Microbe Hunters* (and if the events were fictional, not historical) to be accepted into the genre.

It is true that a steady diet of science-fiction may have certain definite effects on a reader. I am inclined to think that one of these effects is a sort of pre-conditioning of society (that part of society which reads the stuff) to accept and deal with the improbable in an effective and mature way; but that's beside the point. Any fan who has tried to 'sell' science fiction to someone who can't get the point should know better than to judge science-fiction by its 'inevitable' results.

I'd like to see first choice of pics go to Al Weinstein for his paragraph on the blessings of science and defense of scientists, although I disagree with him here and there. Second place to Bob Silverberg who is an inspiration to careful reading and loves The Vizi in spite of us. A third to Ray Ramsay because I agree with practically everything he says and I don't want to give him a first because it might sound too prejudiced in favor of my own ideas. (That doesn't sound quite right, but there it is.)

One last remark which I trust will arouse your sympathy, in spite of the fact that it will certainly alienate the affections of the more superstitious fans in the audience:

NO CHAIN LETTERS WILL BE FORWARDED FROM 201 VETERANS VIL-LAGE!

BETSY CURTIS

So THAT'S why we didn't get our \$1,000,000! Fie... fie...!

CALLING ALL FEN

DEAR EDITOR:

All fans in Southwest Washington are asked to get in touch with Tom Daniel at Brown-Elmores, or Bill Weeks at 608 W. 1st St., Aberdeen, Wn., for the purpose of forming a new, and active, fan group. No definite meetings have as yet been set, but plenty of other ideas have come forth, such as a club fanzine, and instructional and mechanical activities that will excite anybody. No age or other limits. Hurry, hurry!

T. R. DANIEL

AF 34117036

T/Sgt. Andre Von Bell,
35th Supply Squadron, Box 45
APO 994, c/o Postmaster
San Francisco, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

...Would like to receive letters from other fans, especially those in my home state, North Carolina. Will try to answer all letters, and if any of you guys or gals have any dog-eared or coverless copies you would care to send to a lonesome airman here in Japan, I would certainly appreciate 'em very much...

From just another Fan,

T/SGT. ANDRE V. BELL

DEAR EDITOR:

For the past three months I have been attempting to organize a STFan club here on the Virginia

Peninsula. So far, my efforts have produced negligible results. As a last resort, which perhaps should have been first, I have decided to try advertising in the prozines. So, I would appreciate it very much if you would print this letter in THE VIZIGRAPH.

If there are any STFen in the Newport News, Hampton, Phoebus area who are interested in forming such a club, would you please contact

C. Ray Bryan
305 N. 2nd St.
Buckroe Beach, Va.
Phone—Hampton 7734

Thank you very much,

C. RAY BRYAN

'S ALL IN FUN, NO?

New York, N. Y.

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

It is with a leer that I take up pen to write you a pome-card... to wit:

ODE TO AN ODEROUS ISSUE

Oh, PLANET's new chief

Is headed for grief,

For Larchmont is here with a pome.

With ink full of acid

And temper not placid,

He's come to drive Bixby back home.

Your first issue's lousy,

The artwork is frowzy,

The yarns except Bradbury's, stink.

You'll have to do better

('s the gist of this letter)

Or PLANET will topple the brink.

Don't mind me, though—it was a pretty good issue, all told. I'm just feelin' blue, with a music exam coming up tomorrow. WHAT AM I DOING READING PS WHEN I SHOULD BE CRAMMING ON ORCHESTRATION?

Scientifanatically yours,

DON LARCHMONT

It is with the sad smile of a crushed rabbit that we take up pen to answer... your wit?

TAKING ISSUE WITH AN ODEROUS ODE

Oh, comments so churlly

Do make us sore surly,

When Larchmont with meter moribific,

Does devastate PLANET,

Does heartlessly pan it,

When everyone KNOWS it's tahrific!

His gunption is null,

He's dull in the skull,

He has all the zest of a zobo,

The ethics of cobra,

Aesthetics of goat,

And knows not his brass from his oboe.

Beware... next time, Don, include your address or your missive will be mislaid on purpose... and bye the bye, are you a Juilliard Music School student? If so, shake, pardner... many's the hour we've fingered the eighty-eight in those hallowed practise-rooms. Luck with your exam.

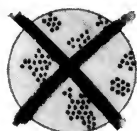
Well... thanks, all and one, for a nice, well-rounded Vizigraph. The November PLANET STORIES will be on sale September 1st... see you then...



RESEARCH EXPERT SAYS:

AMAZING NEW SCIENTIFIC FORMULA (Contains no Alcohol) destroys these hair-killing germs:

Staphylococcus
Albus



Morococcus



Microbacillus



Pityrosporum
Ovale



NOTHING CAN DO MORE TO

SAVE YOUR HAIR

Look for these symptoms. ITCHY SCALP, DANDRUFF, UNPLEASANT HEAD ODORS, HEAD SCALES, HAIR LOSS! It may be nature's warning of approaching baldness. Be guided by NATURE'S WARNING! Do as thousands do: start using the NEW AND IMPROVED, AMAZING, SCIENTIFIC HAIR RESEARCH FORMULA (it contains no alcohol).

NEW FORMULA GIVES BETTER RESULTS

It kills quickly and efficiently millions of trouble-breeding bacteria. This new and improved HAIR RESEARCH FORMULA now KILLS safely and quickly ALL FOUR types of these destructive hair germs. Many medical authorities know that these hair-destroying germs are a significant cause of baldness. Do what science knows nothing better for you to do: KILL THESE GERMS, they may DESTROY your HAIR GROWTH. Act now, mail coupon below and test it at home for 10 days FREE at our expense. NO OTHER FORMULA known to science can do more to SAVE YOUR HAIR!

GET FIVE IMMEDIATE BENEFITS

- (1) KILL the four types of germs that may be retarding your normal hair growth.
- (2) HELP stop scalp itch and burn.
- (3) FOLLOW the instructions of the treatment and start enjoying healthful massage action.
- (4) HELPS bring HAIR-NOURISHING blood to scalp.
- (5) HELPS remove ugly loose DANDRUFF.

Don't wait till you get BALD! It's too late then. Remember, science knows no cure for baldness. The NEW AND IMPROVED HAIR RESEARCH FORMULA that contains no alcohol, helps keep your scalp (that may be sick) free of loose dandruff, seborrhea, and helps stop the hair loss they cause. With this formula your hair will appear thicker, more alive and attractive almost from the first time you use it.

HAIR RESEARCH CO., Dept. 69
1025 Broad Street, Newark, New Jersey

SATISFIED USERS SAY

"Nothing I have ever used has done more for my hair"—A. P., Trenton, N. J.

"My friends remark how much better my hair looks after using your formula for only two weeks"—A. L., Boston, Mass.

"No Hair Expert I have ever gone to has done as much for me"—H. H., Chicago, Ill.

"I was skeptical at first but took a chance, now after ten days' trial I am convinced. Nothing has ever helped me more than your treatment"—J. S., Los Angeles, Calif.



MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE WITH A 10-DAY FREE TRIAL

If the NEW AND IMPROVED AMAZING SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH FORMULA doesn't live up to your expectations, if you don't feel it's the best thing you ever did for your hair, if your hair and scalp don't appear improved, if you are not 100% delighted with it, if after using it 10 days you don't see an improvement, return the unused portion and your money will be refunded in full. You have nothing to lose, you are the sole judge. SO DON'T DELAY, MAIL COUPON TODAY!

SENT ON APPROVAL!

HAIR RESEARCH CO., Dept. 69
1025 Broad Street, Newark, New Jersey

Rush one month's supply of your NEW AND IMPROVED AMAZING SCIENTIFIC HAIR RESEARCH FORMULA at once. I enclose \$2.00 cash, check or money order, ship prepaid. My money will be refunded if not satisfied.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

☐ I enclose \$5. Send three months' supply.

I understand if not delighted with the NEW-AND IMPROVED HAIR FORMULA, I can return it after 10 days for full purchase price refund.



BE A SUCCESS AS A RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIAN

**TWO
FREE BOOKS
SHOW HOW
MAIL COUPON**

**America's Fast Growing Industry
Offers You All Three**

**I TRAINED THESE
MEN AT HOME**



OWNS SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS
"Today I am considered an expert Radio-Television Technician. I have four employees working in my shop. Repair business has doubled."—PAUL MILLER, Toledo, Ohio.

RADIO ENGINEER ABC NETWORK

"4 years ago, I was a bookkeeper with a hand-to-mouth salary. Now I am a Radio Engineer with key station of the ABC network."—NORMAN H. WARD, Ridgefield Park, New Jersey.



\$5 TO \$10 WEEK IN SPARE TIME
"While learning, made \$5 to \$10 a week in spare time. Now I have a spare time shop in my home and earn as high as \$25 a week."—LEANDER ARNOLD, Pontiac, Michigan.

SERVICING BUSINESS PROFITABLE

"For the past two years, I have been operating my own Servicing business. Net profit, \$6,850. N.R.I. training made it possible."—PHILIP G. BROGAN, Louisville, Kentucky.



GETS FIRST JOB THROUGH N.R.I.
"My first job, with KDRL, was obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. Am now Chief Engineer, Police Radio Station WQOX."—T. S. NORTON, Hamilton, Ohio.

SEES PROFIT IN RADIO-TELEVISION

"I am operating my own Radio Sales and Service business. With FM and Television, we are looking forward to a very profitable future."—ALBERT PATRICK, Tampa, Florida.



SPARE TIME SERVICE PAYS WELL
"Work only in spare time at Radio and average about \$40 a month. Knew nothing about Radio before enrolling with N.R.I."—SAMUEL T. DEWALD, St. Clair, Pennsylvania.

1. EXTRA MONEY IN SPARE TIME

As part of my servicing course, I send you SPECIAL BOOKLETS starting the day you enroll that show how you can make \$5, \$10 or more a week EXTRA fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while learning. Tester you build with parts I send helps.

2. GOOD PAY JOB

Your next step is a good job installing and servicing Radio-Television sets, or becoming boss of your own Radio-Television Sales and Service Shop, or getting a good job in a Broadcasting Station. In 1945, there were 943 Radio Stations. Today, about 2,700 are on the air! Result—thousands of qualified men stepped into good jobs. Then add developments in FM, Two-Way Radio, Police, Aviation, Marine, Micro-wave Relay Radio. Think what this means! New jobs, more jobs, good pay for qualified men.

3. BRIGHT FUTURE

And think of the opportunities in Television. Only 19 Stations were on the air in 1947. Today, more than fifty. And the experts say there will be over 1,000 within three years. Manufacturers are producing over 100,000 Television sets a month. Be a successful Radio-Television Operator or Technician . . . get in line for success and a bright future in America's fastest-growing industry!



I Will Train You at Home You Practice Servicing or Communications with MANY KITS

I've trained hundreds of men with no previous experience to be successful TECHNICIANS. I will train you, too. Or now you can enroll for my NEW practical course in Radio-Television Communications. Train for your FCC operator's or technician's license. You learn Radio-Television theory from clear, illustrated lessons in my tested home study course.

As part of both my Servicing and Communications course, I send you MANY KITS of modern equipment that "bring to life" theory you learn.

You Build This MODERN RADIO

As part of my Servicing course, I send you speaker, tubes, chassis, loop antenna, transformer. EVERYTHING you need to build this modern Radio. Use it to conduct many valuable tests and practice servicing. It's yours to keep.

You Build This TRANSMITTER

As part of my New Communications course, I send parts to build this low-power broadcasting Transmitter that shows how to put a station "on the air." Perform procedures demanded of Broadcast Station operators, conduct many tests, experiments. It's yours to keep.



VETERANS

**GET THIS TRAINING
WITHOUT COST
UNDER G. I. BILL.
MAIL COUPON NOW.**



Mail Coupon for Books FREE

Coupon entitles you to ACTUAL LESSON on Radio Servicing with many pictures and diagrams plus my 64-page book, "HOW TO BE A SUCCESS IN RADIO-TELEVISION" both FREE. See what my graduates are doing and earning. Send coupon today! J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. OFG, National Radio Institute, Pioneer Home Study Radio School, Washington 9, D. C.

Good for Both—FREE

**MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. OFG
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.**

Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-page Book about How to Win Success in Radio-Television—both FREE. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name _____ Age _____

Address _____

City _____ Zone _____ State _____

☐ Check if Veteran ☐ Approved Under G. I. Bill